

University of Mississippi

eGrove

Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Graduate School

1-1-2019

Rambling blues: mapping contemporary North American blues literature

Josh-Wade Ferguson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/etd>



Part of the [African American Studies Commons](#), and the [American Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ferguson, Josh-Wade, "Rambling blues: mapping contemporary North American blues literature" (2019). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. 1752.
<https://egrove.olemiss.edu/etd/1752>

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of eGrove. For more information, please contact egrove@olemiss.edu.

RAMBLING BLUES:
MAPPING CONTEMPORARY NORTH AMERICAN BLUES LITERATURE

A Dissertation
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in the Department of English
The University of Mississippi

by

JOSH-WADE FERGUSON

August 2019

Copyright Josh-Wade Ferguson 2019
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

ABSTRACT

“Rambling Blues: Mapping Contemporary North American Blues Literature” revises the methodological assumptions that have underwritten our understanding of blues literature and the politics of race and region that surround it. Where previous commentators have defined blues literature primarily through its formal and thematic connections with blues music and with the sociohistorical contours of black southern life more generally, this dissertation expands the boundaries of how we conceive blues literature by examining Langston Hughes’ poems “The Weary Blues” (1925) and “Po Boy Blues” (1926), August Wilson’s *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* (1984), Jesmyn Ward’s *Salvage the Bones* (2011), James Hannaham’s *Delicious Foods* (2015), Kiese Laymon’s *Long Division* (2013), Joy Harjo’s “Everybody Has a Heartache: A Blues” (2014), Sherman Alexie’s *Reservation Blues* (1995), Richard Wagamese’s *Keeper’n Me* (1994), Drew Hayden Taylor’s *The Bootlegger Blues* (1991), *The Baby Blues* (1999), *The Buz’Gem Blues* (2002), *The Berlin Blues* (2007), and *Cerulean Blue* (2015) and George Elliott Clarke’s *Saltwater Spirituals and Deeper Blues* (1983) and *Whylah Falls* (1990). In contemporary African American literature, the blues, through representations of music, musicians, and aesthetics, enables a cross-generational connection that focuses on how precarity in the wake of slavery and its afterlives continue to plague black working-class communities; the blues in contemporary African American literature animates a cultural memory. Understanding the development of the blues as a form of cultural remembering as well as an idiom of resistance and self-expression provides an important critical framework to articulate the allure of the blues for Indigenous and

African-Canadian writers. What develops across these multiple voices, are representations of the blues as a musical form, a way of reckoning with personal and collective pain, an expressive mode of resistance, and a means of articulating socio-economic precarity in the wake of slavery and settler colonialism. Ranging from the US Deep South, and Indigenous reservations, to black Nova Scotia, Canada, this dissertation provides a remapped understanding of blues writing, outlines the debt English North American literature owes to African American culture, and articulates the blues as a contemporary and global form of expression that resists cultural and social elision.

DEDICATION

For Dad, I did it.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would never have been able to complete this project without the guidance I received from my committee. My deepest gratitude to Adam Gussow, Jay Watson, Leigh Anne Duck, Derrick Harriell, and Tony Bolden for their suggestions, comments, and guidance. This project was supported by a generous summer fellowship from the University of Mississippi English Department and the chair, Ivo Kamps. I'm indebted to Dan Stout and his inexhaustible patience. Thank you to Martyn Bone for the careful reading. Eve Dunbar gave me the support, mentorship, and friendship I needed to get through some of the more difficult stages. Stephen Monroe kept me afloat and at home—thank you.

Thank you to my friends and family as they supported me over these many years. Jacob Agner, Scott Obernesser, and Brendan Steffen listened to me when I needed it and distracted me when that was a better option. David, David, Dave, and Ashton reminded me there was life beyond the dissertation. Bobby gave me a home in Mississippi. Mack never quit believing in me. Thank you to Dr. Thai Tran and Kim Loan Ta. Your support and love have meant the world to me. Jan-Leigh, thank you for all the phone calls. Mom, I hope I can keep making you proud. And, to Lizzie Tran, I was blessed the day I met you. Thank you for your patience, kindness, and tough love.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	ii
DEDICATION	iv
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	v
INTRODUCTION: RAMBLING BLUES	1
CHAPTER ONE: BLUES, HISTORY, AND MEMORY	17
CHAPTER TWO: BLUES, PRECARITY, AND REMEMBERING	58
CHAPTER THREE: BLUES, SOVEREIGNTY, AND INDIGENEITY	96
CHAPTER FOUR: BLUES, BLACKNESS, AND AFRICAN-CANADIANITÉ	140
LIST OF REFERENCES	185
VITA	206

Introduction: Those Rambling Blues

It's not only what happened to you—it's what happened to your foreparents and other people. And that's what makes the blues.

Yonder Come the Blues, John Lee Hooker (2001)

Contemporary blues and jazz women come from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds, and certainly the audience for this music resides not only within but far beyond the borders of black culture. With the globalization of music distribution—indeed, with such developments as unauthorized CD production in some countries—the scope of black music and its historically broad implications can no longer be confined to African American communities.

Blues Legacies and Black Feminism, Angela Y. Davis (1998)

The blues went traveling and wound up in every corner of the world.

When I Left Home, Buddy Guy (2012)

For the 2019 Modern Language Association Conference in Chicago, IL, I organized a panel entitled “Sweet Home Chicago? Rethinking Blues Literature.” Chicago, one of the most famous urban homes of blues music, was an appropriate location to interrogate how we read for the blues through place, space, ethnicity, national identity, and narrative aesthetic. In the same city where Muddy Waters, Etta James, Willie Dixon, Buddy Guy, and numerous other black southern migrants made names for themselves as stars of the blues, I asked my panelists to present papers that provided new and dynamic ways of conceiving how we recognize, discuss, and analyze representations of blues music, musicians, and aesthetics in literature. Considering the disciplinary changes in the humanities, I asked them to discuss how blues literature can be

read through critical race theory, regional studies, transnationalism, post-colonial studies, music studies, activism, and popular culture. The goals of the panel were to work through the current state of blues literature; assess its (continuing) disciplinary value; articulate the literature's function as cultural memory and national history; investigate the blues' ability to express cultural experiences beyond the US and black experience; and reconsider the future of the literature as a whole. A tall order, to be sure.

In my call for papers, I provided two necessary areas of inquiry that would help illuminate contemporary readings of blues literature: First, I wanted papers that examined the role of the blues, both a music and black working-class expressive idiom, in contemporary African American literature. With the turn to what the cultural critic and TV personality Touré deems “post-blackness,” where individual expression no longer constitutes the voice of the black community, the blues lose their power to, as Black Arts intellectual Larry Neal put it, “reach way down into the maw of the individual and collective experience” (425). Because they are no longer a black popular music that expresses the *de jure* experience of black life under Jim Crow, the blues become, to paraphrase Kenneth Warren's argument concerning the change in African American identity after the Civil Rights Act, either history or memory.¹ Leaving us to ask, is blues an artifact that once held prominence but no longer holds any cultural weight, or a part of a cultural past that still informs the African American literature produced today? What, if anything, do the blues offer contemporary African American literature?

The second area of inquiry was meant to expand the generic boundaries of blues literature by asking the panelists to examine the myriad blues novels, poems, and plays written by non-African American authors. These additions to blues literature provide cultural variations on the

¹ For more on this argument, see Warren's *What Was African American Literature?* (2011). Warren's idea is also at the center of the first chapter of this dissertation.

blues as well as meditations on black experience in the US and across the Atlantic basin. For example, Spokane/Coeur D'Alene Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues* (1995), Ojibway Richard Wagamese's *Keeper n' Me* (1994), Ojibway Drew Hayden Taylor's blues plays, some of Muskogee (Creek) Joy Harjo's poetry, Chinese-American Bill Cheng's *Southern Cross the Dog* (2013), British-Indian Hari Kunzru's *White Tears* (2017), African-Canadian Esi Edugyan's *Half-Blood Blues* (2011), and the poetry and fiction of Africadian (African-Acadian-Canadian) George Elliott Clarke add to an evolving blues literature. How do we account for these additional voices? Are they simply appropriators of an established black form, or does their inter-ethnic cultural borrowing have larger implications for blues literature? What do their texts add to the blues literary genre?

I received many thoughtful proposals that read for the blues in exciting and innovative ways. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the majority of abstracts centered on established authors, those who in some way “naturally” took their place in an array of blues writers, either because the word “blues” appeared in the titles of their works, or because those works dramatized stories about blues musicians, or both, including James Baldwin, Langston Hughes, Sherman Alexie, and August Wilson. One of the delightful surprises was a proposal to read Ezra Pound's *Pisan Cantos* (1948) and M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* (2008) for the “bluesy confessions of wrongs done and wrongs suffered,” where these testimonies—“just testifyin’”—provide a “poetics of fracture that gives rise to the relentless drub of *Angst*” (Clarke “For Cryin Out Loud,” emphasis in original). Other papers considered the blues as a critical lens in a plethora of ways: as ethos (a philosophical orientation towards experience), praxis (a theoretical and practical orientation defining interaction), and even religiosity (a religious orientation combining the secular and the sacred). I was shocked, though, that not a single abstract proposed reading (for) the blues in

contemporary African American literature.² Nor did a single proposal suggest new ways to conceive or consider the blues as a theoretical concept or literary genre—things we may take for granted since the publication of Houston Baker’s *Blues, Ideology, Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (1984) and Tony Bolden’s *Afro-Blue: Improvisations in African American Poetry* (2004). Nor, finally, did a single proposal consider the blues poems, plays, or novels by non-African American authors beyond Sherman Alexie’s *Reservation Blues* (1995), a notably important text—and one subject of the third chapter of this dissertation—but only a single example of an increasingly expansive blues literature.

The panel was a success. The papers were insightful and impassioned. Yet, I couldn’t help but think that a large disconnect had developed between traditional understandings of blues literature as an African American project and, on the other hand, the burgeoning array of texts in a multi-ethnic but non-African-American canon that draw on blues music, blues themes, and other blues elements to tell distinctive blues stories. Blues literature, it might be argued, has broadened; it now includes a multitude of voices. The goal of this dissertation, then, is to account for how the blues is manipulated and used in contemporary North American Anglophone literature; how the boundaries of blues literature have extended to include new voices, and to offer a preliminary assessment of what that means for the genre.

In contemporary African American literature, for example, the blues, through representations of music, musicians, and aesthetics, enables a cross-generational connection that focuses on how precarity in the wake of slavery and its afterlives continue to plague black

² I should note that one of my panelists was unable to attend the conference due to a personal matter. In order to have as many voices as possible reading for the blues in new and innovative ways, I invited my friend and mentor Dr. Eve Dunbar from Vassar College. She presented on James Hannaham’s *Delicious Foods* (2016) and read the blues as an emotional state of being, ignoring the blues musician in the novel to, instead, interrogate how the trauma and ruptures of the past continue to haunt black Americans into the present. Before I invited Dr. Dunbar to the panel, not a single paper was prepared to discuss the blues in relation to contemporary African American literature.

working-class communities. The blues in contemporary African American literature animates a cultural memory. Understanding the development of the blues as a form of cultural remembering as well as an idiom of resistance and self-expression provides an important critical framework to articulate the allure of the blues for Indigenous and African-Canadian writers. What develops across these multiple voices, are representations of the blues as a musical form, a way of reckoning with personal and collective pain, an expressive mode of resistance, and a means of expressing socio-economic precarity in the wake of slavery and settler colonialism.

Rambling Blues

At the heart of the word “rambling” is a sense of wandering movement, “straying from place to place” (“Rambling” *OED*). The use of “rambling” in blues lyrics, however, fulfills a double-entendre that signifies on a sexual promiscuity made possible by straying place to place.³ In Eugene “Buddy” Moss’s “Midnight Rambler” (1933), he is distraught that his baby “don’t ever stay at home” because she is a “midnight Rambler.” She has always been a Rambler. She “rambled her whole life through.” The song ends with him fed up with her promiscuous ways. He has bought a pistol and promises that tonight will be “her last go-round.” In “Ramblin’ Kid” (1942), performed by the Sons Simms Four—with vocals and guitar by Muddy Waters—the notions of “rambling” and “leaving” are thrown into stark relief where the song ends on the singer claiming that he is “leaving” and that he “ain’t gonna ramble no more.” The man at the center of this song is done with promiscuous behavior both in himself and his baby, and the only way to change is to pick up and leave. Rambling, in these examples, is an illicit movement where numerous sexual partners can be found from house to house, town to town. The combination of

³ For further explanation of how “rambling” is used in the blues, see Debra Devi’s *The Language of the Blues: From Alcorub to Zuzu* (2006).

sex and travel marks an “important divide between life during slavery and life after emancipation,” because, for the first time in the US, black men and women were free to choose their own sexual partners and to go where they pleased (Davis 4).

In the case of this dissertation, the “rambling” in “Rambling Blues” is animated by this same pioneering spirit: to move from text to text and find new and unfamiliar homes where the blues has laid its weary head, leaving a little part of itself along the way. Invoked by the title of this dissertation, to “map” is to extend the parameters of where the blues can be found in literature. With the contemporary changes in blues music, including increasingly racially diverse performers and audiences and the movement from vinyl records to digital downloads, the “scope of black music and its historically broad implications,” activist and scholar Angela Davis argues, “can no longer be confined to African American communities” (xvii). To map the blues in contemporary North American literature, then, is to search out the locations and the people where the blues have come to roost amongst the pages of their poetry, novels, and plays.

As a contemporary popular black musical form in the 1920’s to the 1960’s, blues music was the voiced experience of black southern migrants trying to make new lives for themselves in the urban north. Brimming with that rambling energy, blues music, an original black folk form, influenced middle-class composers and writers to incorporate the rhythms, the repetitions, and the ironic tension between lyrics and performance into their art.⁴ Part of the allure of blues music for an emerging black literati—the writers of the Harlem Renaissance including Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Sterling Brown, and late-comers like Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, and James Baldwin—is how it combines “work songs, group seculars, field hollers,

⁴ Blues lyrics, the literary and blues critic Albert Murray suggests, “provide the most specific clues to the historical source of the blues predicament to which they address themselves. What blues instrumentation in fact does, often in direct contrast to the words, is define the nature of the response to the blues situation at hand, whatever the source” (*Stomping* 68).

sacred harmonies, proverbial wisdom, folk philosophy, political commentary, ribald humor, elegiac lament, and much more.” The blues constitutes an “amalgam that seems always to have been in motion in America” (Baker, *Blues* 5). Blues music, in this sense, is an American music that provides access to the roots of black life in the United States—from slavery to emancipation, from object to subject. The music contains the history of black working-class experience in America. The blues is, as the songwriter and talented musician Willie Dixon put it, “the true facts of life expressed in words and song, inspiration, feeling and understanding” (2). This amalgam of black folk experience and performance creates a dynamic musical form that lends itself to the political pursuits of black intellectuals and artists resisting the racial definitions of US apartheid by asserting a historical American presence rooted in the voices and experiences of a now free black people.

This central connection of blues music with the experience of black southern migrants and black folk roots informs much of African American blues literature. Think here of such texts as Langston Hughes’ *The Weary Blues* (1925) or his novel *Not Without Laughter* (1930), Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) and *Mules and Men* (1935), Sterling Brown’s *Southern Roads* (1932), Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952), Albert Murray’s *Train Whistle Guitar* (1975), Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1982), Gayl Jones’ *Corregidora* (1975), and August Wilson’s *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* (1984). The blues later was seen as an aesthetic that expressed black experience and art, as seen in the manifestos written by Larry Neal and Kalamu ya Salaam.⁵ Houston Baker used blues to great critical effect as a vernacular theory of African American literary ingenuity and expressions of the quotidian struggles and triumphs within the US black canon leading up to the Civil Rights Movement. Much of the literary and

⁵ See specifically Larry Neal’s “Any Day now: Black Art and Black Liberation,” and Kalamu ya Salaam’s “The Blues Aesthetic.”

critical interest in the blues in the first half of the twentieth century saw the word “blues” as shorthand for black lived experience under Jim Crow, a way of promoting black humanity and defying the limitations imposed by racial definitions. The writing of Hughes, Hurston, Brown, and Ellison provide in some ways an ethnographic record—quite literally in the case of Hurston’s *Mules and Men*—that depicts a rich black cultural form drawn from daily black life that provides a voice for black working-class people. The blues texts written by Murray, Walker, Jones, and Wilson, provide a revised written record of black experience under Jim Crow from the perspective of post-civil rights black experience. They reinterpret, retrospectively, how black musicians and people cultivated black identity through blues music while constricted by the limitations of the Jim Crow south and the urban north.

This more contemporary, post-Civil Rights Act iteration of blues literature is the second iteration of the genre. The blues in the texts of Murray, Walker, Jones, and Wilson is used as both the setting and the subject. For example, Alice Walker’s *Color Purple* is set in rural Jim Crow Georgia, sometime after the first world war and leading into the second. The epistolary novel focuses on two sisters, Celie and Nettie, who are separated at a young age after the death of their mother. Shug Avery, the sexy and sexually free blues singer, helps Celie understand her own sexuality and agency as a woman by offering her friendship, support, and sex. The novel relies on the blues to establish the scene. Because blues music was contemporaneous with the Jim Crow south, representations of the music and the culture—especially performances and the spaces that house them, juke joints for example—strongly evoke that historical period. The story is also dependent on the blues feelings that animate the text. Celie is raped on the first page of the novel. She is forced to bear two children that she thinks are the results of incest. She is married off in order to care for the home and children of a man who detests her, and whom she

detests. Celie's sister Nettie is sent away and eventually ends up in Africa. Celie also develops a successful business and inherits property. The blues feelings these moments incur recognize the domestic spaces that black women are forced to occupy, the molestation and traumas enacted on their bodies by black men and white people, as well as the racial terror incurred by the Jim Crow south. The addition of Walker's, Murray's, Wilson's, and Jones' blues texts provide new ways of interpreting how blues music and feelings can be incorporated into literature by reexamining the experience of the previous generation.

Contemporary African American literature uses representations of blues music, musicians, and aesthetics in an increasingly expansive fashion. Departing from literary usages of the blues to reimagine the experience of black Americans under Jim Crow, contemporary black authors, like James Hannaham, Jesmyn Ward, and Kiese Laymon, invoke the blues to establish a legacy of black subjection in the wake of slavery and its afterlives. Their additions to the blues literary canon are haunted by the inescapability of the past, a time and place where black precarity is inherited at birth. Using the blues as a means of remembering a black history as well as informing a cultural memory, these texts highlight contemporary black experience in the US south as it resists the legacy of Jim Crow, where black Americans are denied the rights of full citizenship and humanity into the present. Hannaham's *Delicious Foods* (2016), Ward's *Salvage the Bones* (2011), and Laymon's *Long Division* (2013) expand the blues literary cannon. These texts resist stereotypical narratives surrounding impoverished black southerners, and, instead, provide varied and empathetic narratives that depict black communities reckoning with the history of black life in the United States.

Moving beyond the evolution of African American iterations of blues literature, the genre expands to include texts that express and inform multi-ethnic depictions of the blues.

Transnational multi-ethnic blues texts can be broken down into two groups: The first group consists of texts that use the blues as a means of creating an alternative American history that acknowledges the precarity of African American experience. The second group is made up of texts that use the blues as a means of multi-ethnic expression outside of African American experience. This dissertation doesn't presume that such cultural borrowing is self-evidently a form of appropriation, but instead seeks to understand how blues expresses individual and collective representation across ethnic lines.

Two examples from the first group, focused on representations of black precarity through a national blues mythology, are Chinese-American Bill Cheng's novel *The Southern Cross the Dog* (2013) and Indian-British Hari Kunzru's novel *White Tears* (2017). Cheng's debut novel revolves around the destruction of the 1927 Mississippi River flood. The narrative follows the life of Robert Chatham as he is uprooted by the surging waters. Robert meets Eli Cutter who is both a piano-playing bluesman and voodoo practitioner. Eli tells Robert that he is "crossed worse than the blackest jinx. Bad and trouble is set to follow [Robert] through this earth" (93). Robert hides in swamps, is forced to build levees, and barely manages to survive throughout the text. Cheng uses black relationships with white music promoters, practices of voodoo, the devil in the blues tradition, and the limitations imposed by Jim Crow to add his text to an American blues canon. Cheng's blues story exoticizes the US south in his attempt to develop black characters, whose precarity steadily increases due to flood, a quickly industrializing south, and white supremacy.

If Bill Cheng's blues text represents black southern precarity during Jim Crow, then Hari Kunzru's blues novel *White Tears* shows the devastation wrought on US black people through the deconstruction of whiteness and the music industry. Kunzru's novel follows the story of Seth,

a young middle-class white man who befriends another and somewhat more privileged white man, trust-fund endowed Carter Wallace. The two bond over their love of music and music production. They mask their “caucasity with a sort of professorial knowledge” (17). The novel is interested in how whiteness claims ownership over black culture: Seth tells the reader, “We really did feel that our love of the music bought us something, some right to blackness” (18). Seth records an old black man singing a blues in New York City, without the man's consent, and Carter convinces him to alter the recording until it becomes an “authentic” blues song, adding guitar and the gritty sound of old vinyl records. They create the bluesman Charlie Shaw and post the song online as a new discovery unearthed from the archives. From the creation of this song as the “genuine article” the story spirals outward and leads back to Mississippi. Moving backwards through time and tracing the rise of the Wallace fortune to the Mississippi state capital in Jackson, the real Charlie Shaw is picked up and forced to work on a levee while on his way to record his blues music. Charlie is killed while laboring for the Wallace family and never receives his payment for his recordings. Kunzru’s novel shows how black southern musicians were disenfranchised from their intellectual property, how white producers continue to benefit from separating black experience and humanity from black culture, and how the American past, the history of Jim Crow, continues to inform white privilege and supremacy today.

The second group of multi-ethnic blues texts, a group explored at length in the second half of this dissertation, use representations of blues music and musicians to bring readers closer to typically ignored and under-represented communities. A number of these blues texts were written by Indigenous authors. Sherman Alexie (Spokane/Coeur D’Alene), Joy Harjo (Creek), Richard Wagamese (Anishinaabe), and Drew Hayden Taylor (Anishinaabe), for example, have written blues poetry, novels, and plays. These additions to the blues canon consider what an

African American cultural form offers Indigenous culture and experience *and* how Indigenous interpretations of the blues expand the genre. In these texts the blues speak to the precarity of Indigenous life under settler colonialism in a similar fashion to the way it does for black life in the wake of slavery. The usage of the blues by Indigenous authors provides a multi-ethnic solidarity where black and indigenous voices speak together against segregation and social control in North America.

Sherman Alexie's 1995 novel, *Reservation Blues*, for example, brings Robert Johnson to the reservation. Alexie uses the blues' global popularity to express the lesser-known narrative of the contemporary American Indian: a narrative where poverty and extreme living conditions seem foreign within the larger American social imagination. Robert Johnson's presence on the reservation is mutually beneficial for the bluesman and the band Coyote Springs: Johnson's myth is (re)formed through the reservation and the Spokane are given an idiom to express their experiences under US colonial rule. Johnson says to Big Mom (the elder woman/music teacher), "this Tribe's been waitin' for me for a long time" and "these Indians might need me. Maybe need my music" (*Reservation Blues* 303). Music, and specifically the blues, offers the novel's characters a way to survive and resist systems of control, in part by enabling the telling of their stories—it gives them a voice. Alexie presents Johnson as an American myth and adds his own mythological heroes: specifically, the Native American trickster Coyote, his larger-than-life elder, Big Mom, and his stand-in for the devil, the capitalist Gentleman. The power in Alexie's extended national mythology lies in having visible Native American and African American figures. Alexie's novel, published in the mid-1990s, puts lived Native American experience on the same level as the newly reanimated Johnson myth, bringing attention to the historical and contemporary traumas enacted on the Spokane Indians.

Furthering my argument for how the literary blues offers cultural exposure, there is also a striking movement of the blues through the Black Atlantic that functions as a marker of “Americocentricity” (Gilroy 191). Black writers use the blues to connect black experience across the Atlantic and to resist a hierarchical model of blackness where African American cultural production reigns supreme. The Africadian (African-Acadian-Canadian) poet and scholar George Elliott Clarke’s poetry collection, *Whylah Falls* (2001), details the lives of the residents of the black-settled Nova Scotian town of the same name, during the Great Depression. The blues are represented by blues poems, lyrics, and the Nova Scotian blues guitarist, Othello Clemence, who is murdered by S. Scratch Seville. Clarke’s use of the blues is an act of what he calls “resistive appropriation,” where he paradoxically appropriates black American cultural forms, in this case the blues, to highlight an Afro-Canadian cultural difference. Clarke’s use of the blues lyric form, as well as representations of blues feelings in a black community during the great depression, asserts a black Canadian presence in the black Atlantic; claims a racialized black Canadian experience as *black*; and deconstructs the myth of Canada as a multicultural haven. Clarke’s *Whylah Falls* resists African American blackness within a hierarchical model by rerouting and redefining US black cultural production through the Atlantic Canadian terrain.

The rambling nature of the blues found in literature maps the different national and cultural legacies of communities and people not traditionally associated with the form by following a series of disconnected routes away from southern roots. This increasingly expansive blues literature represents the legacy of African American cultural production and how it diffuses across new geographies, nationalities, and ethnicities. Importantly, the blues in these myriad and contemporary iterations provide a means of accessing and “worrying” the blues feelings that plague the communities depicted in these texts. At the heart of these contemporary novels,

poems, and plays is a yearning to express the wrongs done and the wrongs suffered. This dissertation's expansive reading of blues literature articulates the lasting legacies of settler colonialism and chattel slavery and the way in which both sorts of history continue to inform contemporary Indigenous and black life. Finally, these contemporary multi-ethnic additions to the blues literary canon de-romanticize the notion of the blues as a folk cultural form whose cultural power lies in the past. Instead, these texts celebrate the blues' ability to express the lived daily realities and cultural similarities of those forced to the margins.

Chapters

The first chapter, "Blues, History, and Memory," investigates the evolution of African American literary blues from a prospective form of black artistic and intellectual practice to a retrospective critical and artistic mode. As representations of blues music develop and flourish in African American literature—moving from the poetry of Langston Hughes to the plays of August Wilson—the political resonances of the form evolve. Following the timeline of Kenneth Warren's *African American Literature*, this historical reading of African American blues literature articulates the shifting perceptions concerning the political potency of the blues as a poetic form and as an aesthetic. Before the Civil Rights Act, blues music and literature articulated a modern black working-class voice, one that expressed the trials and tribulations of Jim Crow and the Great Migration. After desegregation, however, representations of the blues in literature become a shorthand for the Jim Crow south and the Great Migration. Working through Langston Hughes, Ralph Ellison, Larry Neal, Houston Baker, and August Wilson, this chapter establishes a model where blues music and its literary equivalent has evolved from a

contemporary folk-expression to a means of historicizing and/or memorializing a black past marred by *de jure* segregation.

Following this historical model of how to read the transitions in African American blues literature, the second chapter, “Blues, Precarity, and Remembering,” investigates how contemporary African American texts—ranging from hip hop, film, and novels—incorporate blues music, musicians, and aesthetics into their narratives to signify on a rich black past that continues to inform the present. Following the influential work done by Christina Sharpe in her *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016), this chapter articulates how the lasting legacies of slavery and its afterlives are articulated through blues music and aesthetics. Under Sharpe’s model of “wake work,” a “method of encountering a past that is not past” by expressing and resisting black precarity, I propose the incorporation of blues aesthetics and music as a narrative trope of remembering (13). Looking at James Hannaham’s *Delicious Foods* (2016), Jesmyn Ward’s *Salvage the Bones* (2011), and Kiese Laymon’s *Long Division* (2013), the blues in contemporary African American literature becomes a signifier of black cultural memory. Literary representations of the blues serve as a way to remember, understand, and connect to the experiences of subjection, segregation, and terror for a generation removed from the struggles of their parents and forebears. The chapter ends by arguing that the continuing presence of the blues in African American literature signals an enduring resistance to stereotypes of blackness, poverty, and southernness as narratives of lack.

Moving away from the US South, the third chapter, “Blues, Sovereignty, and Indigeneity,” investigates how blues music and aesthetics have been incorporated into Indigenous poetry, plays, and novels. Departing from the seemingly incongruous political bents of liberation for African Americans and decolonial sovereignty for Indigenous people, I argue for

a multi-ethnic solidarity where Indigenous people use the blues as a means of accessing and expressing their cultural traumas. Through Joy Harjo's poem "Everybody Has a Heartache: A Blues" (2014), Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues* (1995), Richard Wagamese's *Keeper 'n Me* (1994), and Drew Hayden Taylor's blues plays—*The Bootlegger Blues* (1991), *The Baby Blues* (1999), *The Buz'Gem Blues* (2002), *The Berlin Blues* (2007), and *Cerulean Blue* (2015)—this chapter establishes an indigenous blues literary tradition across the US and Canada and argues that the blues are an appropriated means of storytelling that centers Indigenous ways of life and precarity to highlight the inequities of colonialism and white supremacy.

"Blues, Blackness, and *African-Canadianité*," the fourth and final chapter, focuses on the blues poetry and criticism of Africadian (African-Acadian-Canadian) poet and scholar George Elliot Clarke. This chapter interrogates how Africadian identity resists subsumption from African American culture by committing, what Clarke calls, "resistive appropriation" of the blues idiom. Clarke's work destabilizes the myth of Canada, where Canada is seen as a post-racial multicultural haven to the north, to show how black Canadians have been culturally erased by African Americans in speeches by Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., and even texts like Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada* (1976). Clarke's *Saltwater Spirituals and Deeper Blues* (1983) and *Whylah Falls* (1990) present black Nova Scotian identity attempting to navigate the dueling draws of the fishing towns and rocky bluffs by the sea *and* the dynamic cultural influence of black America. Clarke uses the blues as a narrative sleight of hand where the form signals Americanness but produces what he calls *African-Canadianité*.

Chapter 1 – Blues, History, and Memory

“Let the blare of Negro jazz bands and the bellowing voice of Bessie Smith singing the Blues penetrate the closed ears of the colored near intellectuals until they listen and perhaps understand . . . We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves.

“The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” Langston Hughes (1926)

“In such an environment the blues was a flag bearer of self-definition, and within the scope of the larger world which lay beyond its doorstep, it carved out a life, set down rules, and urged a manner of being that corresponded to the temperament and sensibilities of its creators. It was a spiritual conduit that gave spontaneous expression to the spirit that was locked in combat and devising new strategies for engaging life and enlarging itself. It was a true and articulate literature that was in the forefront of the development of both character and consciousness.”

“Preface to Three Plays,” August Wilson (1991)

“While a desire for historical accuracy partially motivates attempts to ground African American literary practice in a terrain more expansive than the world of Jim Crow, one can also see how proving such a claim would be an existential necessity. In a society that no longer sanctions Jim Crow, there could not be a literature structured by its imperatives. When racial identity can no longer be law, it must become either history or memory—that is, it must be either what some people once were but that we no longer are, or the way we were once upon a time, which still informs the way we are.”

What Was African American Literature?, Kenneth Warren (2011)

Current scholarship on the blues literary tradition has become increasingly retrospective. The reason for this is twofold: First, blues music has lived its heyday on the popular African American music scene, having been overshadowed by R&B and hip hop. The blues has quickly

become a historic object linked to a moment in American history and letters, arguably concurrent with Jim Crow and racial apartheid in the post-reconstruction period (1896-1965). Second, the blues isn't often the central organizing theme in contemporary African American literary criticism. Some of the more recent turns in that area have focused on rearticulating African American literary history, proposing the theoretical possibilities and limitations of Afro-Pessimism and Afrofuturism, as well as outlining the social and economic devastation wrought by mass incarceration.⁶ The blues, a globally recognized African American idiom, however, still has important critical and cultural value in African American literature.

Historically, blues music has been understood as a representation of the lived experience of the black working class. It was of the moment and provided a means of expression that navigated the antinomies of black folk life during Jim Crow America. In his 1952 paper entitled "The Blues," Sterling A. Brown argues that "the blues tell a great deal about one segment of

⁶ Perhaps the most polarizing recent critique of African American literary history is Kenneth Warren's *What Was African American Literature?* (2011). I would also add John Ernest's *Chaotic Justice: Rethinking African American Literary History* (2009).

Frank B. Wilderson III proposed a compelling articulation of Afro-Pessimism in his 2010 book *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*. He argues that instead of celebrating blackness as a "cultural identity . . . Afro-Pessimism theorizes it as a position of accumulation and fungibility; that is, as condition—or relation—of ontological death" (58). Jared Sexton has also contributed influential elements to the discourse in his articles "The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism" (*InTensions Journal* 2011), and "Afro-Pessimism: The Unclear Word" (*Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge* 2016).

Afrofuturism, on the other hand, is, as Ytasha L. Womack puts it in her 2013 book, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*, an "intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation." She continues, "Whether through literature, visual arts, music or grassroots organizing, Afrofuturists redefine culture and notions of blackness for today and the future. Both an artistic aesthetic and a framework for critical theory, Afrofuturism combines elements of science fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity, and magic realism with non-Western beliefs" (9). We have seen an influx of Afrofuturist texts and films in recent years, including, but not limited to, the writing of Octavia Butler and Colson Whitehead, as well as the films *Black Panther* (2017) and *Sorry to Bother You* (2018).

Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Color Blindness* (2012) addresses the widespread social, economic, and political concern for the mass incarceration of black people in the US. Her book has influenced social action and intrigue across artistic and critical lines: ranging from documentaries (Ava Duvernay's *13th* [2016]) to literary criticism (Patrick Alexander's *From Slave Ship to Supermax: Mass Incarceration, Prisoner Abuse, and the New Neo-Slave Novel* [2017]).

Negro life . . .the secular, the profane” (291). The blues, under Brown’s formulation, do not tell a great deal about black religious or middle-class life. Instead, the connection to the earthlier elements of black vernacular life provides access to a black folk culture, which was a fruitful means to express the trials and tribulations of daily black life under Jim Crow.

The blues, as a folk musical form and later a popular music, becomes part of the archives of African American cultural production. The music becomes part of the historical record. Sherley A. Williams, in her “The Blues Roots of Contemporary Afro-American Poetry” (1977),” argues that the blues, along with “spirituals, play and work songs, cakewalks and hoe-downs” are the “first *recorded artifacts* to grow out of the complex relationship between Africans and Europeans on the North American continent” (emphasis added, 542). In this same essay, Williams uses the historical elements of the blues as a means to understand its influence on post-civil rights African-American poetry. She makes a retrospective turn, where blues music provides access to a black historical past and becomes a cultural memory.

A retrospective turn in blues literature is of a piece with recent critical and creative approaches to African American literature as a whole. Looking back to previous moments or eras in black history allows for the possibility of unearthing new ways of perceiving blackness as well as resisting established narratives that erase or demean black experience. Take the rise of the neo-slave narrative, for example, which began in 1966 with the publication of Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee* and then developed into an established literary genre. Literary critic Ashraf A. Rushdy explains that the neo-slave novel is “indebted to the first form of representation for people of African descent in the New World, the slave narrative itself” (87). The contemporary form, however, buoyed by the successes of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, contested demeaning and uninformed depictions of slavery with a “revisionist energ[y]” (89) by being

“newly attentive to the culture and community and resistance of slaves” (90). The retrospective turn to consider slavery and its representations engendered a more nuanced and attentive depiction of black agency despite enslavement.

Current critical conversations concerning the boundaries of African American literature are centered on this retrospective turn. Since the release of Kenneth Warren’s *What Was African American Literature?* (2011), the historical limits of the literature and how it is conceived have been hotly debated.⁷ According to Warren, African American literature is the literary output of black Americans under the *de jure* segregation of Jim Crow. The timeline for Warren’s African American literature begins with the US Supreme Court’s 1896 decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* and ends when Jim Crow was “finally dismantled, at least judicially and legally, in the 1950s and 1960s” (2). Warren argues that during this period black writing’s primary focus was to show the intellectual and creative abilities, as well as the humanity, of black Americans. It was a moment of great intellectual and creative output that produced a sense of collective identity, an American blackness, that resisted and revised the racial definitions set by Jim Crow.

This period of black artistic, intellectual, and cultural output provided a cohesive intellectual project that looked towards a liberated black future. For Warren, under his periodization of African American literature, this moment was “more prospective . . . than retrospective.” He explains that “the past was indeed important, but primarily as a way of refuting charges of black inferiority and only secondarily as a source and guide for ongoing creative activity. In the main, writers and critics tended to speak as if the best work had not been written but was yet to come, and the shape of that work was yet to be determined.” Warren ends

⁷ For an interrogation of Warren’s argument, complete with his response, see Melissa Asher Daniels, Gregory Laski, John Ernest, Soyica Diggs, Russ Castronovo, Sharon P. Holland, and Kenneth W. Warren’s cowritten piece, “Assessing *What Was African American Literature?*; or, The State of the Field in the New Millennium” (*African American Review* 2011).

his statement by claiming that “if anything separates what African American literature is now from what is was, that difference, ironically, can be summed up by quoting that most American of American writers, Ralph Waldo Emerson: ‘Our age is retrospective’” (42-3). Warren’s presentation of this period is particularly important because it marks a perspectival shift just as much as it designates a literary period. While Warren’s argument is that black literary output *after* the Civil Rights Act becomes more retrospective, it may be more accurate to think of our age as introspective. The rights of citizenship—even with how unreliable they have proven to be—provide black writers with the freedom to interrogate a black past, to explore its lasting effects on contemporary black experience, and to articulate the spaces where black voices have been erased from the record.

Warren’s historical argument puts African American literary identity into flux. What does it mean to be an African American writer after Jim Crow? How does African American writing identify the change in blackness from what was once a legally enforced racial classification into what has now become a cultural identity? Warren says it another way:

While a desire for historical accuracy partially motivates attempts to ground African American literary practice in a terrain more expansive than the world of Jim Crow, one can also see how proving such a claim would be an existential necessity. In a society that no longer sanctions Jim Crow, there could not be a literature structured by its imperatives. When racial identity can no longer be law, it must become either *history* or *memory*—that is, it must be either what some people once were but that we no longer are, or the way we were once upon a time, which still informs the way we are. (96, emphasis added)

Warren rightly notes the existential dilemma his proposition incurs: If the social and political effort of African American literature—within the limits that he set out—was to foster self-representation and self-reliance in the face of American apartheid, then what are the identity politics of post-Jim Crow African American literature? Is the literature composed during Jim Crow simply a part of history that is in the past, or does it inform a memory of confinement and nationality built on race that animates our present literature? The liberation that comes with the Civil Rights Movement also engenders a new introspective black writing that has the liberty to interrogate and revise the damages wrought by Jim Crow America divorced from the limitations of Jim Crow black politics.

While Warren's argument has its share of problems due to its focused scope—isolating a current and vibrant genre of literature from its literary genealogy and skimming over the contemporary problems faced by African Americans in the US, like police brutality and the prison industrial complex (what Michelle Alexander later deems the “new Jim Crow”)—he does gesture towards a significant reorientation of black US literature.⁸ The concept of blackness as an identity becomes nuanced and individualized when race is no longer a legal signifier. The writer, cultural critic, and television personality Touré explains this moment in his *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness? What it Means to be Black Now* (2011) as a “generational break from that part of Black history in which to be Black meant a near-constant, warlike struggle for de jure and de facto rights.” “The fight for equality,” he continues:

⁸ This claim might seem as if I'm short-changing Warren because contemporary awareness of police violence and mass incarceration became hot topics after the publication of his book. The reality is, however, that police brutality towards vulnerable black citizens is a long-standing issue in the United States, consider Nixon's “War on Drugs” which disproportionately focused on black communities, COINTELPRO, and the attack on Rodney King. Although Michelle Alexander coined the usage of the “new Jim Crow” to refer to US mass incarceration, activists, artists, and scholars alike have decried the abuses of the state and its subjection of black citizens through incarceration and demanded the abolishment of prisons, including Angela Y. Davis, Assata Shakur, Eldridge Cleaver, and Mumia Abu-Jamal.

is not over but that shift from living amid segregation and civil war to integration and affirmative action and multiculturalism—and also glass ceilings, racial profiling, stereotype threat, microaggression, redlining, predatory lending, and other forms of modern racism—has led many to a very different perspective on Blackness than the previous generations had. (21)

Touré explains that this perspectival reorientation is called “post-blackness,” which is an aesthetic movement built on a shift that gives a new generation of black Americans “emotional distance from the past struggles,” allowing them to play on, and with, the memories of their elders, and the history contained within a range of archives (37).⁹

“Post-blackness” is an individualized approach to being black since the Civil Rights Movement. The post-black person rejects the gazes of both white and black folk that limit his/her way of moving through the world. To be post-black is to resist stereotype threat from the inside and outside and to promote a personal understanding of what it is to be black. It is worth noting that Langston Hughes makes a similar proclamation for the true black artist in his essay, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” (1926). The difference between the two manifestos is that Hughes writes under the limitations of American apartheid and Touré writes as a black citizen. Hughes looks to the future. Touré claims that future is now. What Touré calls “a very different perspective on Blackness” is this same new perspective that Warren presents as “retrospective,” where young black writers have the freedom to interrogate their connections and responsibilities to African American history and experience—from slavery, to desegregation, to the current moment.

⁹ The term “post-blackness” was coined by the curator of the Studio Museum in Harlem, Thelma Golden and the artist Glen Ligon when they tried to describe the changes they began to see develop in the work of contemporary black artists. See Touré’s *Who’s Afraid of Post-Blackness? What it Means to be Black Now* (2011), pg 16.

While Touré's and Warren's texts can both be read as part of the post-racial fallout of the Obama presidency, what they provide for this chapter is a means of understanding the dynamic perspectival changes in black art and literature. Post-civil rights black art interrogates the past in dynamic fashion. The blues in literature follows a similar trajectory: it begins as a dynamic means of understanding *de jure* blackness buoyed by the political hope of becoming a universalizing national music, then becomes a retrospective means of understanding African American literary history. The form looks back and moves forward: a Janus-faced model that allows for a connection to a cultural memory as well as an aesthetic that expresses the complexity of being black in America.

To understand blues literature's transition from history to memory after the ratification of the Civil Rights Act is to recognize the historical significance of the blues during Jim Crow and its contribution to black literature. After 1965, when black audiences move on to new and exciting forms of black popular music—like soul and funk—the blues is used as a site of memory—in regard to both Pierre Nora's famous *lieux de memoires* and Toni Morrison's use of “the site of memory” in her essay on memoir and fiction—to reinterpret and resist depictions of black experience during Jim Crow. Blues music in literature is both a history and a memory where black resilience, survival, struggle, and joy can be expressed.

Blues and History

Blues music's rise in cultural importance is concurrent with Warren's historical timeline for African American literature. Establishing a timeline for the origins and emergence of blues music is as hotly contested as are definitions of “the blues,” because the emergence of a vibrant

folk culture is not necessarily concurrent with the popularization of the musical form.¹⁰ Angela Y. Davis makes the compelling case that the blues are the music of the free-born generation that grew up after emancipation. Blues music is a postslavery music because it “articulated a new valuation of individual emotional needs and desires” that came with the new liberties of black citizenry (however limited by segregation and the terrorism of Jim Crow) (*Blues Legacies* 5).¹¹ The blues share personal concerns, frustrations, successes, sexual conquests and the like in ways that enslavement did not allow. Along with this new mode of self-expression, Davis explains that emancipation enabled African Americans to move freely within the South and across the nation, to become educated, and to choose sexual partners—few or many, of the same or opposite sex. These new liberties allowed for new joys and heartbreaks as well as a new black consciousness—what Davis calls new “psychosocial realities”—that provided the freedom to express oneself. The blues’ rise in the ranks of black and national popular culture is concurrent with the black modernism developing in Harlem and across the nation in the 1910s and 1920s.

¹⁰ In his *Father of the Blues* (1941), W. C. Handy claims discovering the blues in 1903 played by an impoverished black man waiting to jump a train in Tutwiler, MS. At the beginning of that chapter (named “Mississippi Mud”), Handy discusses hearing a “gang of black section hands during the late nineties” singing a version of “John Henry,” which effectively demonstrates that the blues as a folk form existed before his discovery as early as the 1890s. In their book, *The Original Blues: The Emergence of the Blues in African American Vaudeville* (2017), Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff argue that the first star of the blues was Butler “String Beans” May,” who was an unrecorded black vaudevillian that died in 1917. In his essay “The Curses: Part 1: Ahjah is Coming,” John Jeremiah Sullivan uses the *Oxford English Dictionary*’s record of the first usage of blues as a term “designating a song, melody, etc., performed in a blues style” to suggest that the idea of “the blues” as a means of designating the musical genre began in 1914. Willie Dixon, a famous blues musician and composer, relates the blues back to biblical history where the blues “was built in man from the beginning. The first thing that came out of man is the blues because, according to the Scriptures, when God made man, man was lonesome and blue” (*The Willie Dixon Story* 2). Peter Muir in his *Long Lost Blues: Popular Blues in America, 1850-1920*, investigates the emergence of blues music before the infamous moment when Mamie Smith recorded “Crazy Blues” in 1920. He interrogates the development of the genre and its over 450 titular blues songs, contesting the narrative of commercialized black blues after 1920.

¹¹ LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) claims, in his *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (1963), that blues “did begin in slavery, and it is from that ‘peculiar institution,’ as it was known euphemistically, that blues did find its particular form. And if slavery dictated certain aspects of blues form and content, so did the so-called Emancipation and its subsequent problems dictate the path blues would take” (50-1). Jones’ claim asserts in many ways that the blues could not have become what it has without the history and experiences of slavery. The crucible of enslavement forged black resilience, the form of call and response from field hollers, as well as a new type of “individual.” “The American Negro” (13).

There are two important origin stories surrounding the genesis of blues music in African American and popular culture more broadly. The first, which informs the second, is the influential narrative surrounding W. C. Handy's now mythic-like folkloric discovery of the ur-blues when he missed a train in Tutwiler, Mississippi and fell asleep at the station.¹² It was 1903 when, he writes, "A lean, loose-jointed Negro had commenced plunking a guitar beside me while I slept. His clothes were rags; his feet peeped out of his shoes. His face had on it some of the sadness of the ages." This nameless poor black man played his guitar by "press[ing] a knife on the strings . . . the effect was unforgettable." "His song," Handy continues:

struck me instantly.

Goin' where the Southern cross' the Dog.

The singer repeated the line three times, accompanying himself on the guitar with the weirdest music I had ever heard. The tune stayed in my mind. When the singer paused, I leaned over and asked him what the words meant. He rolled his eyes, showing a trace of mild amusement. Perhaps I should have known, but he didn't mind explaining. At Moorhead the eastbound and westbound met and crossed the north and southbound trains four times a day. This fellow was going where the Southern cross' the Dog, and he didn't care who knew it. He was simply singing about Moorhead as he waited.

That was not unusual. Southern Negroes sang about everything. Trains, steamboats, steam whistles, sledge hammers, fast women, mean bosses, stubborn mules—all become subjects for their songs. They accompany themselves on anything

¹² Bryan Wagner, in his *Disturbing the Peace: Black Culture and the Police power After Slavery*, writes about how frequently Handy shared this story before it was finally canonized in his autobiography. A version was recounted by Abbe Niles in the introduction for Handy's *Blues: An Anthology* (1926). Wagner also reminds his readers that both Robert Palmer's *Deep Blues* (1981) and David Evans's *Big Road Blues* (1982) recount Handy's tale. See pages 25-29 of Wagner's book. Houston Baker Jr. also recounts Handy's tale in the "Introduction" to his influential *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (1984).

from which they can extract a musical sound or rhythmical effect, anything from a harmonica to a washboard.

In this way, and from these materials, they set the mood for what we now call the blues. (74)

Later, at a performance in Cleveland, Mississippi, Handy allowed a three-piece band, consisting of a “battered guitar, a mandolin and a worn-out bass,” to play the local music (what Handy refers to as “native music”) during his band’s set (76). The string-band lets loose and played music that was “pretty well in keeping with their looks” (76); the “kind of stuff that has long been associated with cane rows and levee camps. Their eyes rolled. Their shoulders swayed. And through it all that little agonizing strain persisted” (77). To Handy’s surprise, the band was rewarded with a “rain of silver dollars” for their efforts. This odd working-class music Handy continued to encounter in the Mississippi Delta proved to have an engaged audience and had the potential to be highly lucrative. This moment was epiphanic for Handy because he recognized the “beauty of primitive music.” The string-band “had the stuff the people wanted. It touched the spot. Their music wanted polishing, but it contained the essence. Folks would pay money for it . . . the American people wanted movement and rhythm for their money” (77).

Handy’s recount of his discovery of the blues in its most “primitive” form, as oral vernacular tradition, positions him as a mediator between the rural black South and America at large. Handy recognized the immediate potential of blues music as a vibrant, popular, contemporary, and sellable musical form. His compositions synthesized the sounds of the cane rows and the levee camps into a more consumable popular music. Historian Karl Hagstrom Miller reminds us that the “shifting connections between race, music, and authenticity” during the transition from minstrelsy to vaudeville to the incoming popular blues had “everything to do

with money” (148). Handy “presented his blues compositions as elaborations of the music he witnessed southern black workers perform,” which authenticated him as a black composer as well as functioned as a means of advertisement (“the *real* black folk blues”) (149). He approaches his compositions as harnessing the “essence” of black folk culture and providing a polished, mass-consumable product. For this, Houston Baker argues that Handy’s autobiography provides “only a simplistic detailing of *a progress*, describing, as it were, the elevation of a ‘primitive’ folk ditty to the status of ‘art’ in America. Handy’s rendering leaves unexamined, therefore, myriad corridors, mainroads, and way-stations of an extraordinary and elusive Afro-American cultural phenomenon” (*Blues* 4, emphasis in original).

Baker’s claim concerning Handy’s simplistic understanding of the cultural phenomenon of the blues is not wholly accurate. While on the surface it seems that Handy only sees dollar signs when he hears the blues, his autobiography, and the description of the “loose-jointed” guitar player in Tutwiler specifically, opens an important window into the new psychosocial realities of black folk people.¹³ Or, at the very least, an important understanding of how one particular middle-class bandleader attempted to record and understand black folk cultures. Handy’s account establishes the tropes of blues myths and narratives. For example, he “helped to sanctify the train-hopping threadbare drifter as a central character in the iconography of the black tradition” (Wagner 27). Handy’s extended narrative of his discovery of that “weird” music played by this impoverished man is presented like an ethnographic record. He focuses on the guitar player like a subject of study. The scene is written with Handy at a remove where he engages with the tramp only as a means to unearth more about the nature of the black folk.

¹³ Adam Gussow provides a compelling reading of Handy’s autobiography to interrogate depictions of southern violence as well as articulate Handy’s own subtle resistance in the face of Jim Crow violence and segregation. See chapter 2, “‘Make My Getaway’: Southern Violence and Blues Entrepreneurship in W. C. Handy’s *Father of the Blues*,” in Gussow’s *Seems Like Murder Here: Southern Violence and the Blues Tradition* (2002).

Cultural critic Bryan Wagner suggests that Handy “idealize[s] the conditions for ethnographic exchange” in order to “take for granted the cultural authenticity of the gift that he receives” (28).

Handy imbues the threadbare musician with an air of timelessness and mystery to highlight the simplicity and therefore the “authenticity” of black folk music. When he asks the musician about the meaning of his lyrics, Handy receives an “amused smile” and rolled eyes. Handy positions himself as an outsider, someone both foreign to the space as well as of a different socioeconomic class. Woken up as if from a dream, Handy uses the late night proximity of the black section of the train station (something he doesn’t mention although he is in the Jim Crow south) as a means to brush elbows with the black underclass, and, by doing so, establishes himself, retrospectively, as an expert in black southern folk culture (Handy’s autobiography was published in 1941). He notes that “Southern Negroes sang about everything,” and they would use whatever materials available to accompany themselves musically. Handy uses the mixture of the space—late-night at a train station in the Mississippi Delta—with the simplicity of the music—one line repeated three times—as a marker of the music’s folk authenticity. Yet, the intriguing part for Handy, and also the key to the changing psychosocial realities experienced by emancipated African Americans, is the singer’s “capacity to embody what he sings. He is someone who hops freights who sings about hopping freights. When he sings, he sings about himself” (Wagner 28).¹⁴ Here, emerging amongst Handy’s ethnographic record of his blues discovery, is a modern black voice asserting itself in its own immediacy. I am here. I will catch this train. I will keep on moving.

¹⁴ Wagner offers an invigorating reading of Handy’s blues discovery moment in his *Disturbing the Peace: Black Culture and the Police power After Slavery* (2009). Wagner positions the black musician as a vagrant to argue how black vagrancy becomes a lasting image of cultural authenticity. See chapter 2 “The Black Tradition from Ida B. Wells to Robert Charles.”

Handy capitalized on that “agonizing strain” and composed a number of hits with his polished popular blues. The self-proclaimed “Father of the Blues” wrote numerous famous blues songs, like “Memphis Blues” (1912), “Yellow Dog Blues” (1912), “St. Louis Blues” (1914), and “Beale Street Blues” (1916). While writing “St Louis Blues,” Handy notes that he aimed to “combine ragtime syncopation with a real melody in the spiritual tradition” as well as the “tango” because some black dancers had “convinced [him] that there was something racial in their response to this rhythm.” While writing the lyrics, Handy explains, “I decided to use Negro phraseology and dialect. I felt then, as I feel now, that this often implies more than well-chosen English can briefly express. My plot centered around the wail of a lovesick woman for her lost man, but in the telling of it I resorted to the humorous spirit of the bygone coon songs” (120). In an attempt to create something new but familiar, Handy uses the practices of minstrel music and coon songs as a means to produce black-inflected music. Handy uses what he deems to be “black” sounds—language as well as musical forms—to package and sell a sanitized black experience for his audience—a mixture of white consumers and African Americans starved for black performers. Many of his songs were later recorded by the emerging female blues singers, both white and black, that came to rule the popular blues scene during the 1920s and early 30s. These female stars that helped launch the blues include Mamie Smith, Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, Lucille Bogan, and Victoria Spivey.

Handy’s account establishes the origins of the blues—the folk music of the working-class—as a fruitful and lucrative means of social and cultural production. The second important historical account of the increasing popularity of blues music highlights the transition from coon songs and black dialect numbers, as performed by white singers, to what would become known as race records. In August 1920, Ohio native and black vaudevillian Mamie Smith made history

when she recorded black composer Perry Bradford's "Crazy Blues" for Okeh records, effectively creating race records in the US. Just months before, February 14th, 1920, Smith had been called in by Bradford to fill in for the white coon shouter Sophie Tucker to record his songs "That Thing Called Love" and "You Can't Keep a Good Man Down." Bradford convinced the white record producer Fred Hager that Smith "sings jazz songs with more soulful feeling than the other girls, for it's only natural with us" (Bradford 118). Betting on a mythic racial authenticity, Bradford and Smith produce the first black composed and black performed secular record. Smith was a success, and when she returned to record "Crazy Blues," she became a national star almost overnight. In the first month alone, "Crazy Blues" sold over 75,000 copies, with the help of black pullman porters who "bought the discs for \$1.00 and sold them for \$2.00" (Snelson). Smith's popularity was due to her performance as well as her crossing the musical color line. She proved that black performers could "make the grade and integrate seamlessly into the existing music industry" (Hagstrom Miller 192).¹⁵

Bradford's composition and Smith's rendition of "Crazy Blues" took advantage of the wide dissemination of their record to produce a song of protest and black achievement. "Crazy Blues" is seemingly about a woman whose man has left her. This heartbreak leads her to contemplate suicide on the train tracks and eventually to "get . . . a gun" and "shoot . . . a cop." The blues critic Adam Gussow argues that "Crazy Blues" is an "insurrectionary social text, a document that transcends its moment by contributing to an evolving discourse of black revolutionary violence in the broadest sense—which is to say, black violence as a way of resisting white violence and unsettling a repressive social order" ("Shoot Myself a Cop" 10).

¹⁵ For extended accounts of Smith and Bradford's historic recording, see Perry Bradford's *Born with the Blues* (1965) and Karl Hagstrom Miller's *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (2010).

Gussow, reading the singer as a paragon of badwoman vengeance, suggests that Bradford's song is a response to the violence of the Red Summer of 1919. The success of "Crazy Blues" in both black and white households across the US is also the success of insurrectionary black resistance that called for violent retribution within the shadow of domestic terrorism in Washington, DC, Chicago, Knoxville and elsewhere across the country.¹⁶

Smith's performance also provides a complicated image of racial performance. Crossing the musical color line demanded that Smith perform Bradford's compositions in a way that satisfied the expectations of white audiences. Smith was a vaudevillian and her "voice resonated with the translations and mutations of racial musical caricature found in turn-of-the-century stage shows" (Brooks 546). Black Vaudeville productions provided a racial authenticity that parodied the "white-imagined blackface minstrel dialect with black-authored musical expressiveness" (546). The cultural critic Daphne Brooks argues that "with traces of black minstrelsy and vaudeville, as well as white coon-shouter contrivances and early jazz instrumentation, 'Crazy Blues' was the quintessential generic and cultural mash-up track of its age" (549). Smith provides a new type of performance that synthesizes cultural expectations with the radical exhilaration of a recorded black voice speaking to and for a black audience starved for nationwide cultural representation. Houston Baker says it another way: "The signal expressive achievement of blues, then, lay in their translation of technological innovativeness, unsettling demographic fluidity, and boundless frontier energy into expression which attracted avid interest from the American masses" (*Blues* 11). Smith ushers in a new age of black cultural and material

¹⁶ A 1919 article from *The New York Times*, "For Action on Race Riot Peril; Radical Propaganda Among Negroes Growing, and Increase of Mob Violence Set Out in Senate Brief for Federal Inquiry," discusses the state- and country-wide neglect of the rising issues of mob violence and lynching that has directly affected the safety and livelihood of black Americans. The article also investigates how new types of integrative interactions has created racial tension in the US, including the returning African American military men from overseas and black and white industrial workers encountering one another.

development where black voices alter, synthesize, and resist white mimicry in exhilarating new ways.

The striking historical implication of both W. C. Handy's "discovery" of the blues and the narrative surrounding Mamie Smith's recording of "Crazy Blues" is that the blues become associated with blackness in a way that challenges a narrative of Americanness as whiteness. Handy uses the blues to produce racially inflected popular music that plays into an American racial imaginary that sees black vernacular performance as primitive. Handy's music, however, opens the door to black vernacular music as written by black people. By the late 1920s, black and white audiences skip the middle-man and head for the source, an idiom that becomes known as folk music and the country blues. Smith perpetuated the myth that black people are naturally inclined to sing the blues. In a January 29th, 1921 article from the *Savannah Tribune*, Smith was characterized as having "done more than any other singer in America to popularize the *genuine* jazz and blues songs of the day" (emphasis added). What Smith brings to the blues is her blackness. When asked about the "secret of her perfect master (sic) of the 'blues' song," she responds:

The typical blues song . . . comes from the very heart of the colored race. It is a peculiar and individual type of music which goes back for generations. In my opinion, it is the foundation of American folk music . . . for the real 'blues' music has a fascination about it which just now is the most popular style of syncopation in the world and to sing it well, you have to feel it.

Smith's particular move here is not just to perpetuate a myth of racial authenticity. She is, instead, claiming space for future black performers to find social and economic mobility as Americans through the blues. The music's popularity is not solely due to white interest in

blackness, but, instead, to the music's capacity to contain a history of black experience while working towards black American citizenship.¹⁷

In 1926, the blues found its home in African American poetry. With the release of his *The Weary Blues* (1926), Langston Hughes made new the intersection of the black folk voice with the cultural politics of black artists and intelligentsia. In his "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926), Hughes argues that the study of the black folk voice provides a necessary resource for establishing a rich black culture and identity. "Let the blare of Negro jazz bands," he writes:

and the bellowing voice of Bessie Smith singing the Blues penetrate the closed ears of the colored near intellectuals until they listen and perhaps understand. Let Paul Robeson singing "Water Boy," and Rudolph Fisher writing about the streets of Harlem, and Jean Toomer holding the heart of Georgia in his hands, and Aaron Douglas's drawing strange black fantasies cause the smug Negro middle class to turn from their white, respectable, ordinary books and papers to catch a glimmer of their own beauty . . . We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves.

Looking to the future, Hughes argues that black folk culture has the potential to germinate an authentic black art. His proposal embraces black folk roots in order to shed the expectations of whiteness.

Hughes uses the blues as a central black folk form in his poetry. His "The Weary Blues" functions similarly to Handy's anecdote of his discovery of blues music. Handy, a middle-class

¹⁷ Two important works focused on how whiteness desires and craves black performance and culture are Eric Lott's *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (1993) and Perry Hall's essay "African-American Music: Dynamics of Appropriation and Innovation" (1997).

composer, watches the blues musician in wonder and takes account of the simplistic primitivism of the folk. It is in the act of witnessing that the blues come alive and that agonizing strain makes a lasting impression. In Hughes' poem, a middle-class narrator overhears the "drowsy syncopated tune" of a black blues pianist. Standing on Lenox Avenue in Harlem, the poetic voice listens and watches in wonder as this black man bares his soul and finds a sense of relief either through the vulnerability of his performance or through death ("He slept like a rock or a man that's dead" [*Weary Blues* 6]). The difference, of course, between Handy's narrative and Hughes' poem is that Handy's story is a memory and "The Weary Blues" is set in the moment of the performance. The poem is not an ethnographic account, but instead an ecstatic ("O Blues!") revelation concerning the potential of blackness expressed through the folk form.

"The Weary Blues" provides not only blues lyrics for the first time in American poetry but also a description of blues performance. The blues music is described as a "syncopated tune," "a mellow croon," a "moan," and a "sad raggy tune" all coming from a "black man's soul" (5). Coupled with these signifiers of the music's sound, Hughes provides two stanzas of the singer's blues. The literary critic Cheryl Wall observes that this "extended quotation marks the first time that the unmediated blues voice was heard in American poetry" ("A Note on 'The Weary Blues'" iii). In his memoir, *The Big Sea* (1940), Hughes recalls that the blues lyrics he included in "The Weary Blues" were from the first blues song he encountered as a child in Lawrence, Kansas (215). Building from that formative memory, Hughes' poem recognizes that the blues is built on an inherent paradox, where the lyrics might "recount a tale of woe, the instrumentation may mock, shout defiance, or voice resolution and determination" (Murray 69). Wall argues that Hughes conveys this "dialectic through the medium of word alone" ("Note" iii). Hughes has the bluesman "rocking back and forth," performing a "lazy sway/ To the tune o' those Weary

Blues,” and thumping his foot on the floor. The description of the performance as it builds to the final stanza of the song suggests that despite how wearied the performer might be in the lyrics of his song, he has the energy to play “far into the night.”

The importance of “The Weary Blues” is myriad; however, in the case of blues music being incorporated into literature, the poem offers one of the first political uses of the blues to represent contemporary black experience. In a mischaracterization of blues critic and historian Steven Tracy’s extended work on Langston Hughes, the literary critic David Chinitz argued that Tracy suggested that “in extending the blues into another art form, Hughes actually identifies with the professional blues composer, through whose influence his own blues are ‘limited in expression’” (179).¹⁸ Chinitz, coming to Hughes’ defense, argues that the difference between the folk blues and Hughes’ poetry is better explained by the “exigencies of writing blues for the printed page than by an identification on Hughes’ part with the commercial lyricist” (179). “The Weary Blues” does share some similarities to Handy’s narrative of discovery. However, instead of *translating* the blues music for mass American appeal, Hughes *transcribes* the lyrics.

Politically, the poem is positioned to focus on the possibilities of black folk music as a means of expressing a “black man’s soul” and to “offer a bitter critique of black life in white America” by highlighting the “alienation and despair” of both the bluesman and the narrator (Wall iii). The bluesman has made his way northwards in search of new possibilities and finds himself out late in Harlem searching for an answer to his exhaustion, a place to rest his head or a remedy to the constant limitations of black life under Jim Crow.

¹⁸ What Tracy claimed in the opening paragraph of his essay “To the Tune of Those Weary Blues: The Influence of the Blues Tradition in Langston Hughes’ Blues Poems” is that “Hughes takes a multiplicity of traditional and literary approaches to blues in his own poems, his use of blues is limited in expression by some dominant influences” (73). Tracy’s overarching argument in this essay is not without its flaws. He often relies on a subjective approach to blues lyrics where “stronger pure blues lyrics” come from bluesmen like Petey Wheatstraw and Robert Johnson instead of Hughes, where he clearly privileges the idea of the “authentic” blues figure coming from the deep south.

Hughes' blues poetry transitions into representations of lyric in his *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927) and especially his later work *Shakespeare in Harlem* (1942). As early as 1926, however, Hughes wrote blues poetry that embodied the vernacular folk voice to "rebel against the middle-class outlook of the Negro movement, searching for an unpretentious 'people' poetry" (Tracy *Langston Hughes and the Blues* 4). In "Po' Boy Blues," Hughes provides the story of black man who has had made his way north and struggles to make ends meet:

When I was home de
Sunshine seemed like gold.
When I was home de
Sunshine seemed like gold.
Since I come up North de
Whole damn world's turned cold.

I was a good boy,
Never done no wrong.
Yes, I was a good boy,
Never done no wrong,
But this world is weary
An' de road is hard an' long.

I fell in love with
A gal I thought was kind.
Fell in love with
A gal I thought was kind.
She made me lose ma money
An' almost lose ma mind.

Weary, weary,
Weary early in de morn.
Weary, weary,
Early, early in de morn.
I's so weary
I wish I'd never been born.

Returning to the idea of weariness, Hughes provides examples of what might have so troubled the bluesman in "The Weary Blues." This "Po' Boy" is doubly poor, he is an impoverished figure worth pitying. Patricia Johnson and Walter Farrell argued that Hughes used many of his

blues poems to expose the “social and economic conditions” that threatened black working-class communities and engendered their blues in the first place (61). In “Po Boy Blues” Hughes’ narrator is bone-tired in his pursuit of something more. He is exhausted from his move northwards; the city turned out to be cold both in its brisk weather and its indifference to a country boy. Despite how “good” the young man has been, he has been unable to reap the benefits of his benevolent behavior. The “gal” he bemoans made him “lose” his money, which suggests that he wasn’t necessarily spending it on her but that he was betting it away. His exhaustion in the morning and his protestation that he once was such a “good boy” suggests that this po’ boy has spent more time living the fast city life at night, out on the town, than preparing for work in the morning. However, this poem is also a story of precarity, a failed migration; the Northern city offers little for a young black man whose only gold he saw before was “de sunshine.”

Hughes’ blues poetry opens the door to black literary use of the blues. Reading these two poems in conjunction depicts Hughes’ increasing comfort with the blues idiom. He moves from transcription to the creation of his own blues lyrics. One of his lasting impacts is that he popularized and legitimized the blues as an important creative form (Tracy “Langston Hughes and Blues Poetry” 95). Hughes’ blues poems “create a syncopated insistence and urgency” that demands his readers witness the experience of the black working-class (Komunyakaa 1140). Hughes breaks the twelve-bar blues and the AAB structure typically associated with the form from three to six lines. Poet Yusef Komunyakaa argues that this shortened line “incorporates a jagged lyricism and modulation” into the poetry, which produces a “modern feeling that depends on vertical movement that sidesteps contemplation but invites action/motion” (1141). Hughes’ blues poetry, then, is invested in movement and action over introspective investigation. His blues

claim: here are the problems plaguing black folks as they survive the limitations of segregation and the failed promises of migrating northward.¹⁹ The blues, for Hughes, are political because they are inherently linked to black subjection and resilience.

The politics of the blues in African American literature written during the Jim Crow period are twofold: first, the blues functioned as a means to fully see and understand representations of contemporary lived black working-class experience. In his often quoted “Richard Wright’s Blues” (1945), Ralph Ellison ends his essay with “one final word about the blues: Their attraction lies in this, that they at once express both the agony of life and the possibility of conquering it through sheer toughness of spirit.” The blues offers no solution nor “social or political action based upon the solid realities of Negro life.” However, in the literary blues, “thousands of Negroes will for the first time see their destiny in public print. Freed here of fear and the threat of violence, their lives have at last been organized, scaled down to possessable proportions.” Blues texts have “converted the American Negro impulse toward self-annihilation and ‘going-under-ground’ into a will to confront the world, to evaluate his experience honestly and throw his findings unashamedly into the guilty conscience of America” (94). The blues provide not only an outlet for the experiences of quotidian black struggle but also a record of them. Here is the struggle faced by black people as they escape the Jim Crow South to find northern cities cold to their dreams.

The second political use of the blues in African American literature resides in its universal appeal. In his essay “The Blues as Folk Poetry,” the blues poet Sterling Brown explains

¹⁹ Literary critics Johnson and Farrell argue that Hughes’ blues poems in his later work *Shakespeare in Harlem* (1942) “grew out of the most politically active periods in Hughes’ career. They carry the burden of a new social vision [communism] that developed on a practical level, out of the poet’s personal participation in the struggles of working-class people, and on a theoretical level, out of his broadened awareness of some of the inherent contradictions in American capitalism” (62).

that there are “so many blues that any preconception might be proved about Negro folk life, as well as its opposite. As documentary proof of dogma about the Negro peasant, then, the Blues are satisfactory and unsatisfactory. As documents about humanity they are invaluable” (325-6). Here, Brown explains that the blues are not merely a means of grouping all black folk life, but instead a means of interpreting the troubles that plague humanity: heartache, travel, fear, violence, death, sex, and the troubles that come with them. Looking to the immediate future, Langston Hughes hoped that the blues would be included on the set lists of “famous concert singers like Marian Anderson and Paul Robeson.” Extending his dream even further, Hughes hoped to see the blues become an Americanizing force that would showcase the contribution blues music has made to the national culture. “A young dancer in New York, Felicia Sorel,” Hughes explains:

is already using the Blues as a background for the creation of new dance forms. I see no reason why great dances could not be born of the Blues. Great *American* dances containing all the laughter and pain, hunger and heartaches, search and reality of the contemporary scenes—for the Blues have something that goes beyond race or sectional limits, that appeals to the ear and heart of people everywhere—otherwise, how could it be that in a Tokio (sic) restaurant one night I heard a Louis Armstrong record of the *St. Louis Blues* played over and over for a crowd of Japanese diners there? You don’t have to understand the words to know the meaning of the Blues, or to feel their sadness, or to hope their hopes” (“Songs Called the Blues 145).

In the early twentieth century, under the limitations of Jim Crow, black composers, musicians, and authors used the blues to express the experiences of the black working class. The incorporation of a black folk music into more popular and contemporary forms articulates the

first iteration of the expansive possibilities of the blues. By providing access to black subjects and their struggles with the socio-economic limitations of black life in the US, the black intelligentsia position the black experience found in the blues as American experience. Concurrent with the height of blues music's popularity with black audiences, the literary blues of Langston Hughes, but also of other authors like Zora Neale Hurston, Sterling Brown, Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, and James Baldwin, present black America's contribution to a national culture.

Blues and Memory

Blues music was a popular and generative genre that engaged with contemporary black experiences and audiences—until it wasn't. In 1990, the blues historian Paul Oliver wrote a new preface for his *Blues Fell this Morning: Meaning in the Blues* (1960), where he considered the influence and the current role of blues music. "In 1960," he writes:

there were still young blues singers in their thirties around: today they are in their sixties . . . Very few came after them, for the black blues club had dwindled in the cities. Rock and soul, and later, hip-hop and rap, filled the space that the blues left. In the country districts, blues remained as the old folks' music, regarded by some young Blacks somewhat condescendingly, and by the more militant with impatience. Blues represented the values of another era, values which they did not share" (xxiv).

In Oliver's reminiscence, he marks a shift away from *prospective* black blues music production, where the value of the music becomes culturally aligned with a black past, which makes it unable to speak to the needs of a contemporary black audience. Musician and blues historian Elijah Wald, in his *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues* (2004),

explains that “for its first fifty years, blues was primarily black popular music” and that in the “1960s, a world of white and international listeners discovered blues, and for roughly the last forty years, the style has primarily been played for a white cult audience” (xiii). During blues music’s black cultural heyday, Wald argues, “its evolution as a style, and the career paths of most of its significant artists, were driven not by elite, cult tastes, but by the trends of mainstream black record buyers” (xiv). Blues music in the 1960s was part of a cultural shift in which black audiences became more interested in emerging black popular musical forms—like soul and funk—and white audiences and intellectuals sought out the blues wherever they could. Due to continued and increasingly vigorous ethnographic and historical study as well as fluctuating musical tastes from black audiences, blues music ceased to be a prospective means of black cultural expression.

By the mid 1960s blues music found an eager fanbase in white audiences, and the blues in literature—from representations of the music to a new aesthetic—became guarded by a new set of black writers. Blues critic Adam Gussow articulates how the Blues Revival and the Black Arts Movement germinated competing ideas concerning the music, where the white revivalists walked a line between deference to, and the gatekeeping of, established black musicians, and the black blues writers claimed the music and its world of experience as their cultural roots. Gussow explains that “white blues fans and musicians have taken blues music—including significant helping of black elders—and run with it, letting (blackened) white blues feeling blossom into blues societies, blues festivals, blues magazines, blues instructional videos, and the like.” White blues aficionados and journalists organized and compartmentalized the blues into strict generic models, creating festivals, awards programs, and subgenres like “classic blues,” “country blues,” “Chicago blues.” The “black blues writers and cultural custodians, unable to prevent these

proliferating appropriations,” however, “have taken their stand on the printed page, black literature has become the locus of a fresh, wide-ranging, and profound *reengagement* with *ancestral* blues, a cultural legacy that white writers can’t begin to appropriate with anything like the cultural ease that marks a surprising proportion of contemporary white blues performance” (“If Bessie Smith Had Killed Some White People” 247, emphasis added). Writers of the Black Arts Movement making the turn back to the blues (the connotation of Gussow’s “reengagement”) for its “ancestral” value shows a marked difference in the music’s value for African American cultural expression. It has become part of the past, either history or cultural memory.

Part of what Gussow brings to the fore is that the blues still had cultural value in African American literature, and especially within the Black Arts Movement, despite blues music’s appropriation by white audiences and musicians. A dramatic shift in the power of black arts and aesthetics was concurrent with the ratification of the Civil Rights Act, the 1965 assassination of Malcolm X, and the rise of the Black Power Movement. Larry Neal deemed this moment of black cultural output as the Black Arts Movement, in his 1968 essay of the same name, articulating a black aesthetic broader than the African American cultural tradition; instead, “it encompasses most of the useable elements of Third World culture” (30).²⁰ Neal describes the black aesthetic as a global artistic milieu inspired by the post-colonial intellectual work of Frantz

²⁰ In his essay “American Slavery in History and Memory and the Search for Social Justice” (2004), Ira Berlin provides a compelling argument for the political turn as well as necessity for black studies to focus on the diaspora: “Post-1965 demographic changes have greatly expanded the range of the black experience, creating growing divisions within black society. The forebears of many contemporary black Americans did not share the experience of wartime emancipation, disenfranchisement and segregation, and the long struggle and heroic triumph over Jim Crow. Many derive from places where, despite their African lineage, they were not considered black. Others identify themselves, not as black, but as Latin American or, more specifically, as Brazilian, Cuban, or some other nationality. Their presence requires reimagining a black American nation and a return to the mainspring of the African American experience in the New World: chattel bondage. Small wonder that the diaspora has become the trope of choice in studying the black experience” (1259).

Fanon. Neal explains that the black aesthetic is motivated by “the destruction of the white thing, the destruction of white ideas, and white ways of looking at the world.” He continues:

The new aesthetic is mostly predicated on an Ethics which asks the question: whose vision of the world is finally more meaningful, ours or the white oppressors’? What is truth? Or more precisely, whose truth shall we express, that of the oppressed or of the oppressors? These are basic questions. Black intellectuals of previous decades failed to ask them. Further, national and international affairs demand that we appraise the world in terms of our own interests. It is clear that the question of human survival is at the core of contemporary experience. (30)

The dynamism that Neal outlines in his excitement for the revolutionary power of black arts shows a very real exigency: how to survive in America as a black citizen? He wants to create a black voice that isn’t beholden to white ideals or social constrictions, including expectations for names, diction, dress, grooming, and behavior in public spaces. Neal is also concerned with a global sense of blackness that attests to his experience in America but connects across the diaspora. Black sovereignty was on the rise with seventeen African countries gaining independence in 1960 and Jamaican independence from Britain in 1962. Neal wants black America to liberate themselves artistically by breaking free from the artistic structures of white western colonial influence.

Neal and other Black Arts spokespeople for the blues were the second stage of the blues impulse’s and blues literature’s movement outward from the black folk into the world. Departing from Handy and Hughes, who wrote when the blues was black popular art, members of the Black Arts intelligentsia sought to claim the blues as African American core culture at a moment when most black Americans were running away from it as popular culture. For Neal, black artistic

liberation is found in the blues. He returns to his articulation of the black aesthetic in his 1969 *Ebony* manifesto, “Any Day Now: Black Art and Black Liberation.” Looking at how the Black Arts Movement “seeks to give a total vision of ourselves,” Neal proposes that the blues express this black self-totalising vision (423). He ecstatically argues that the blues are the “spiritual and ritual energy of the church thrust into the eyes of life’s raw realities” (424). The form “represent[s] an epic cycle of awesome proportions—one song (poem) after the other expressing the daily confrontation of Black people with themselves and the world. They are not merely entertainment. They act to clarify and make more bearable the human experience, especially when the context of that experience is oppressive” (425). “The blues singer,” Neal argues:

is not an alienated artist moaning the songs of self-pity and defeat to an infidel mob. He is the voice of the community, its historian, and one of the shapers of its morality. He may claim to speak for himself only, but his ideas and values are, in fact, merely expressions of the general psychology of his people. He is the bearer of the group’s working myths, aspirations, and values. And like the preacher, he has been called on by the Spirit to rap about life in the sharpest, the harshest terms possible. (425)

Neal understands the blues as both a means of remembering a painful black past and articulating a workable mythology but also as a generative model for interpreting and preparing for a liberated black future. He calls it an “ethical standard,” a form meant to teach ways of becoming liberated, as well as dictate the rules of black interactions in the community and beyond (425). The blues are also meant to be a foundational aesthetic that allows artists to “carry the past and future memory of the race, of the Nation . . . They link us to the deepest, most profound aspects of our ancestry” (427). The blues is a means of tapping into a lost past that connects black experience across the diaspora. They become not only a foundational element of

the aesthetic but a means of routing black American experience back to its African roots. Neal, more than anything, wants to assert the *blackness* of the blues. He is unflinchingly exclusionary in his desire to assert the reality of the black thing as a liberatory antecedent to the “white thing.” Neal’s decolonial presentation of the blues attests to the medium’s later allure by non-white authors who seek to represent their lived experience in contestation of white euro-American narratives, later taken up in the third chapter of this dissertation.

Neal’s championing of the cultural potential of the blues is a direct response to backlash within the larger Black Arts and Black Liberation movements as well as white cooption of the music. Frantz Fanon disregarded the blues in his *Towards the African Revolution* (1967) because he saw it as “the slave’s response to the challenge of oppression” (37). In his essay “On Black Art” (1968), activist and scholar Maulana Ron Karenga deemed the blues “invalid” because “they teach resignation, in a word, acceptance of reality.” For Karenga, the new black aesthetic planned to “change reality” and the blues had to be discarded because they were tainted by the rural south, Jim Crow, and by white appreciation (from minstrel shows to “crossover” records). Other black writers and cultural theorists took umbrage with the blues—including the poets Haki Madhubuti and Sonia Sanchez—because they were thought to be associated with the “benighted rural South: they were the cry of the slavery/sharecropping continuum, the sorrow-songs associated” with the original scene of subjection, the slave auction block (Gussow “Bessie Smith” 232).²¹ However, Neal saw the blues as black and as liberatory because they contained the history and cultural memory of black experience in the New World.

²¹ For a thorough interrogation of the split between the black arts movement and its approach to blues as well as how the white blues revival and the Black Arts Movement informed one another, see Adam Gussow’s “If Bessie Smith Had Killed Some White People: Racial Legacies, the Blues Revival, and the Black Arts Movement.”

Following Neal's manifesto, the blues in blues literature animate numerous elements of black experience: they express black resilience, they relate to a black folk culture, they attest to urban black experience and southern migration, and they connect to a black ancestral legacy that informs both a cultural memory and future memories. Houston A. Baker, Jr. in his influential *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (1984), claims that the "blues defy narrow definition. For they exist, not as a function of formal inscription, but as a forceful condition of Afro-American inscription itself" (4). Baker claims that the blues cannot be simply defined as a singular, narrow, cultural artifact, instead it is the expression of black vernacular experience. For him, the blues function as a "matrix" of "Afro-American culture" that acts as a "point of ceaseless input and output, a web of intersecting, crisscrossing impulses always in productive transit" (3). Blues, this cultural form that contains the constant interflow of cultural expressivity with black experience, is a "synthesis" that "constitute[s] an amalgam that seems always to have been in motion in America—always becoming, shaping, transforming, displacing the peculiar experiences of Africans in the New World" (5).

Blues, as Baker presents it, is a critical framework that articulates black vernacular expression in the New World. Baker is interested in developing a "vernacular theory" of African American literature based on a study of tropes. He wants to provide a means of reading black literature through the improvisatory structure of the blues with respect to the cultural importance of vernacular black experience. Looking at the texts he uses to establish his thesis, Baker is already looking backwards at an established black literary tradition: Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1789), Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, and American Slave* (1845), Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), Paul Laurence Dunbar's *The Sport of*

the Gods (1902), Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) and *Black Boy* (1945), and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952): all texts written and published before 1965. Using his blues theory, a dynamic and ludic model built on tropes and representations of black vernacular ingenuity and experience—not representations of blues music or musicians—Baker looks for a way to articulate the trajectory of pre-civil rights African American literary history.

In the literature produced by black Americans after the ratification of the Civil Rights Act, the blues was used to connect to a segregated United States in order to develop a black cultural memory. Texts like Albert Murray's *Train Whistle Guitar* (1974), Gayl Jone's *Corregidora* (1975), Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), and August Wilson's plays *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1982) and *Seven Guitars* (1996) use the blues as a means of representing a black cultural past. These texts are haunted by the history of slavery and the terrors of Jim Crow. They are concerned with imagining a black history where blues was the popular music of the day and interrogating the moment when black oppression was signaled by Jim Crow laws and segregation. As a group, these texts provide a generational focus on, and a cultural return to, how blues music is representative of a black past. But they also signal a type of rupture from this black history that can only be reached through memory and artistic representation. Much like Kenneth Warren's existential split in the epigraph and introduction of this chapter, these writers investigate the blues as memory to understand the "way we were once upon a time, which still informs the way we are."

Writing through memory provides new ways of interpreting how history and the present are connected to individualized experience. In "The Site of Memory" (1995), Toni Morrison explains how memory "weighs heavily" on her writing and how, combined with imagination, it

enables her to find “total access to the unwritten interior life” of her characters (91-2). Morrison, positioning herself historically as a “writer in the last quarter of the twentieth century, not much more than a hundred years after Emancipation, a writer who is black and a woman,” sees her writerly responsibility as “rip[ping] the veil drawn over ‘proceedings too terrible to relate’” (91). Referring to the ways black authors of slave narratives would elide the atrocities of chattel slavery from the pages of their books, Morrison uses their historical erasure, their self-censorship, as a call to action. For her, the spaces and times where black “interior life” has been erased from the archives of history are the sites where memory and imagination perform a “literary archeology” (92).

Morrison’s use of “site of memory” invokes a term at the center of Pierre Nora’s influential essay “Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*” (1989), where he outlines how spaces, monuments, events, and the like, signify a break from the consciousness of the past where memory and history work at odds. If, for Nora, memory “takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images, and objects” then history “binds itself strictly to temporal continuities, to progressions and to relations between things” (9). Memory is oral and shared amongst people; it is of the vernacular in these ways. History is authoritarian, it holds the facts and provides a linear and structured narrative. Historian Ira Berlin argues that if history is a “detached and disinterested weighing of all the evidence, memory is a selective recall of a portion of the past that makes no pretense of universality” (1265). A site of memory is the product of history and memory interacting, of the “interplay between the personal and the collective” (Fabre and O’Meally 7). Representations of blues music and musicians in post-Civil Rights African American literature—including novels, poetry, plays, autobiography and criticism—act as sites of memory. The blues conjure up ideas of the segregated US South as well

as self-expression coming from a “black man’s soul;” national history and personal memory collide. Using the blues in this fashion, post-Civil Rights twentieth century African American authors look retrospectively at the segregated US.

Blues music is both the capitalistic production of records (sides) and albums—objects created for profit—coupled with the personal expression of quotidian black experience. The advent of blues records provided wider access to those black voices. The blues has been captured in the grooves of the vinyl and lacquer. In August Wilson’s “Preface” to the collection *Three Plays* (1991), where he investigates his coming into being as a playwright, he has a moment of epiphany—a covenant with the blues muses, if you will—when, in the fall of 1965, he put on a 78 rpm recording of Bessie Smith’s “Nobody in Town Can Bake a Sweet Jellyroll Like Mine” and “the universe stuttered and everything fell to a new place” (564). “It was the beginning of my consciousness,” Wilson explains:

I was a representative of a culture and the carrier of some very valuable antecedents.

With my discovery of Bessie Smith and the blues I had been given a world that contained my image, a world at once rich and varied, marked and marking, brutal and beautiful, and at crucial odds with the larger world that contained it and preyed and pressed it from every conceivable angle. (564)

For Wilson, the recorded blues offer an entrance into, a connection with, black American history. Bessie Smith’s 1923 rendition of Clarence and Spencer Williams’s blues tune provides a plaintive musical accompaniment with the story of “Miss Mandy Jenkins” crying out from her “bakery shop” that her “sweet jelly roll” is the sweetest, hottest stuff around. Smith engages in pointed sexual signifying. Her song, like many women’s blues songs, “celebrated and valorized black working-class life while simultaneously contesting patriarchal assumptions about women’s

place both in the dominant culture and within African American communities” (Davis 120). Miss Mandy Jenkins is, after all, a business owner whose establishment produces the highest quality product in town, be that pastries or her body.²² For Wilson, Smith’s song provides access to a cultural memory that reminds him that his history as a black American is a fecund and important narrative within the collective national memory.

Self-described as “fired in the kiln of black cultural nationalism,” Wilson approaches his plays as an opportunity to highlight black “self-determination, self-respect, and self-defense” (565) for black audiences in the 1980’s. “The blues *was* a flag bearer of self-definition,” for Wilson, “it *was* a spiritual conduit that gave spontaneous expression to the spirit that *was* locked in combat and devising new strategies for engaging life and enlarging itself” (565, emphasis added). By using the past tense, Wilson signals that the blues were at one time a viable means of self-expression, but their potency is in the past. It was, after all, an old record from 1923 that provided his epiphany. The blues are part of black cultural history that he “elevated . . . rightly or wrongly, to biblical status,” where he “rooted out the ideas and attitudes expressed in the music, charted them and bent and twisted and stretched them” (565). The blues “look at black life with an anthropological eye, use language, character, and image to reveal its cultural flashpoints and in the process tell a story that further illuminates them” (566). Wilson’s blues plays uses the blues to recognize the experience, history, and lessons held, as he put it, “between the lines” and in “blank spaces” (565). His creative aesthetic is to take the essence of the blues, black resilience in the face of precarity—the ability to laugh-to-keep-from-crying—and blend memory and imagination to fill the gaps between the voice on the record and the contemporary listener.

²² It is worth noting that signifying on baked goods in the stead of women’s bodies carries forward into contemporary black popular music too, where “cake” is used to replace booty.

The importance of Wilson's rhetorical and creative rationale for writing plays involving blues music lies in his evocation of a black past where he commits black experience, fictionalized but rooted in lived experience, to written record. His two additions to the blues literary cannon are the plays *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* and *Seven Guitars*. They are part of *The Pittsburgh Cycle*, a collection of ten plays that encapsulate black experience and history in each decade of the twentieth century. Nine of the ten plays are set in Pittsburgh's Hill District; *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* is set in 1927 Chicago.²³ Literary critic Christopher Bell explains that by "situating the bulk of his literary output in the Hill, Wilson offers a microcosm of the poor, urban African American experience in the twentieth century" (118). Working from decade to decade, Wilson infuses each play with the culture and politics of the time as well as turns his eye critically to black interactions with systems of control, white people, and each other.

Although Wilson's "Preface" establishes that the history of the blues broadly informed his writing, in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, for example, he focuses on the blues as a narrative device that establishes both the setting and the subject matter. The play is set in a recording studio, where Wilson depicts the often-turbulent power dynamics that subsist between white record executives and black musicians. The first half of the play reads like a blues inflected *Waiting for Godot*, leaving the musicians and the audience wondering if Ma Rainey, the Mother of the Blues, will ever make her way onstage. Once Ma finally arrives, the recording session is flooded with problems, an altercation with a police officer, technical difficulties, and slimy record executives trying to cheat Ma and the band members out of their money. Waiting is one of the recurring narrative tropes and becomes the central force that swells the tension amongst the

²³ There has been a wide breadth of scholarship down on Wilson and his *Pittsburgh Cycle*. Sandra G. Shannon edited an important collection of essays that gathered a variety of essays that covered Wilson's plays, his politics, food and social justice, and his lasting legacy. For more, see Shannon's *August Wilson's Pittsburgh Cycle: Critical Perspectives on the Plays* (2016).

characters.²⁴ Throughout the play, Levee, the trumpet player, is battered with comments from his bandmates. Ma Rainey tells him that he “play ten notes for every one you supposed to play” and that the song “don’t call for that” (101). Jealous of the power and fame that Ma wields compounded with the frustrating day at the studio and his personal traumas, Levee sasses Ma and responds, “back up and leave me alone about *my* music” (101, emphasis added). Unwilling to play for Ma the way Ma expects, Levee is fired from her band. Although frustrated, Levee feels as if he has been freed of Ma’s unnecessary restraints and musical conservatism. He is excited about the possibilities of establishing his own band and recording his own arrangements, a deal that he has worked out with the record executive, Sturdyvant.

Wilson’s play uses the blues to index racial and social formations—the traumas engendered by the Jim Crow South carried along to the North, in Levee’s case—and to promote the continuing need for black people to struggle for pride, self-ownership, and collective affirmation. For example, in the play, Levee, unlike Ma, has no leverage on his name and has no power with his dealings with Sturdyvant. Levee is paid five dollars for each of his songs even though, Sturdyvant says, “they’re not the type of songs we’re looking for” (107). Levee argues that he needs to play them for the songs to sound right and that his music is “what the people is looking for. They’s tired of jug-band music. They wants something that excites them. Something with some fire to it” (107). Despite his sound argument for the changing musical tastes of record purchasers, Sturdyvant insists that Levee’s songs don’t work and lack a viable audience. Sturdyvant, however, keeps the songs. Earlier in the play, Levee asserts that he “studies the white man. I got him studied good,” and that he will not let any white person take advantage of

²⁴ I’m not the only scholar to have noticed how central waiting is to Wilson’s play. Sandra G. Shannon’s essay “The Long Wait: August Wilson’s *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* (1991), provides a valuable reading on the racist legacy of enforced waiting periods for African Americans and reads that legacy throughout Wilson’s play.

him. The reality is, however, that he is not prepared for the way Sturdyvant treats him, and he has no support network on which to rely. Levee is left with the office door slammed in his face and with a few measly five-dollar bills for his trouble. After all of this, Toledo, the piano player, steps on Levee's shoe. This final assault is too much for Levee, and he breaks. He stabs Toledo in the back, and the play ends with Levee holding the dead Toledo in his arms and yelling "Don't look at me like that! Toledo! Nigger, don't look at me like that! I'm warning you, nigger! Close your eyes! Don't you look at me like that!" (111).

The blues in this play show up most pointedly as music, the recording session as well as the issued recording the play is named after. Historically, Wilson's play has been understood as a meditation on Ma Rainey as a representative figure of blues music. Her ability to use her celebrity and talent as a means of self-preservation—despite her being duped out of the rights to her songs by the record company—is an improvisation on Houston Baker's "economics of slavery" where the black subject uses their value as an object for their own gain under limited white structures.²⁵ Ma Rainey demands that her nephew Sylvester is paid a separate twenty-five dollars and refuses to sign the releases until the deal is made. She is rightfully aware of how she is being used by the white record executives. "They don't care nothing about me," she says:

All they want is my voice. Well, I done learned that, and they gonna treat me like I want to be treated no matter how much it hurt them. They back there now calling me all kinds of names . . . calling me everything but a child of god. But they can't do nothing else. They ain't got what they wanted yet. As soon as they get my voice down on them recording machines, then it's just like if I'd be some whore and they roll over and put their pants on. Ain't got no use for me then. (79)

²⁵ For more on this concept, see Baker's *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*.

At the heart of Wilson's play is the exploitation of black labor and black bodies more broadly. Levee breaks from the swelling pressures and attacks, not the white executive, but his black bandmate. Levee's name and the time the play is set—March 1927—also signify on the large-scale flooding of the Mississippi River. Not only were predominantly black areas along the river basin and the Mississippi delta affected by the surging waters, but black labor was used afterwards to develop new infrastructure, specifically draining flooded areas and building levees.²⁶ Levee's violent outburst is an expression of his frustration and inability to find upward mobility as well as metaphorical representation of the damage inflicted on black bodies as a result of white incompetence and heartlessness. Levee garners no respect as an artist—and harbinger of the oncoming jazz fever—and has no outlet as a black man in segregated America.

The point of this brief reading of Wilson's play is not to show how he uses the blues in his play—there are already many excellent academic studies that do so—but to show that looking back at recent black history and experience through the blues becomes a generative model for black literary output.²⁷ What Wilson presents is the intimate relationship amongst bandmates during the latter phase of Ma Rainey's career—Rainey would record her last song in 1928—as they bicker amongst themselves about musical arrangements, share traumatic stories about how they have been physically and emotionally scarred, and watch their dreams die in front of them. The play is focused on the claustrophobic spaces of the US Deep South and the

²⁶ There have been myriad academic studies concerning the infrastructural and cultural ramifications of the 1927 flooding of the Mississippi. For more information, see Joh M. Barry's *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How it Changed America* (1998), Susan Scott Parrish's *The Flood Year 1927: A Cultural History* (2018), Pete Daniel's *Deep 'n as It Come: The 1927 Mississippi River Flood* (1998), and Richard Mizelle Jr.'s *Backwater Blues* (2014).

²⁷ For interrogations of how blues is incorporated and used in Wilson's plays see Jay Plum's "Blues History, and the Dramaturgy of August Wilson," Richard Nogle's "Waking the Dead: History and Memory in August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, and *The Piano Lesson*," Sandra G. Shannon's "A Transplant That Did Not Take: August Wilson's Views on the Great Migration," and Patricia M. Gant's "Putting Black Culture on Stage: August Wilson's Pittsburgh Cycle."

Urban North, where a young black man like Levee can't catch a break. The play also depicts how black female blues stars eked out spaces for themselves under the limitations of white studio executives. Rainey knows her worth and will squeeze out every cent she can get before she loses all rights to her music, revealing, too, the predatory practices at play. The blues for Wilson is represented through both *mise en scène* and subject. The play is about the creation of a resonant blues recording, but it's also about the traumatic wounds, foreclosed dreams, and race-based exploitation—the blues—suffered by the play's black protagonists.

The same double usage of the blues can be found in other post-civil rights blues texts. Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* is set in Georgia and Africa during Jim Crow between World War One and World War Two. Shug Avery, the female blues star, brings her blues to Celie. The music informs the setting as much as it becomes a site of expression that produces a love story between women, sisters, and the land. Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* is set in Kentucky during Jim Crow and follows Corregidora, a female blues singer as she grapples with her new-found infertility and the generational trauma she bears from the incestuous rape of her grandmother and great grandmother by the Portuguese slave owner, Corregidora. The novel uses the blues to access the recent history of emancipation, the way slavery and its afterlives follow black diasporic subjects, and the limitations of Jim Crow on black southerners. The blues is inseparable from these texts because it is at the center of their narratives, both in space and in representation. These texts, then, turn retrospectively to the blues, to a segregated United States. They tell us, in their renarrativization and interrogation of a black past, that the blues contain the history of American apartheid.

The cultural production of blues music and blues literature during the early twentieth century by black composers, musicians, and authors seemed to be on the edge of national and

global influence. Hughes' blues poetry was concurrent with blues music's cultural heyday, positioning blues as a dynamic and contemporary means of expressing black and, more globally, human experience. However, as blues music became popular beyond the black community, black nationalist artists attempted to consolidate the blues' cultural potential as singularly *black*, effectively shaping the aesthetics of the blues as a potent black cultural memory. In so doing, the literary blues evolve from the expression of contemporary black working-class voices seeking some type of security in the face of Jim Crow and migration to retrospectively articulating black experience under these social and racial limitations. As we move into later chapters, the increasingly diverse literary iterations of blues music, musicians, and aesthetics continue to expand the parameters of the form, including the blues as narrative remembering, as an Indigenous means of self-expression, and as an appropriable form for asserting an Africadian presence.

Chapter 2 – Blues, Precarity, and Remembering

The ellipsis always knows something more came before it and something more is coming after it.

Long Division, Kiese Laymon (2013)

The blues isn't just a sound . . . I think that's something that white people have really gone and goofed on, thinking that they've pegged down the blues and they can package it. When you do that, then some wily black woman is going to come and subvert you every single time, and here I am. The blues needs to move.

“Adia Victoria Wants to Make the Blues Dangerous Again,” Adia Victoria (2019)

I think if we're looking for the blues to manifest in a certain way, then we're going to miss so many echoes of the blues.

“Obsession, Desperation, and Curiosity: A Conversation on the Poetics of Blues with Tyehimba Jess and Derrick Harriell,” Derrick Harriell (2019)

In a 2012 issue of *Vanity Fair*, the long-time music journalist Lisa Robinson prefaced a question for Gary Clark Jr. by explaining to him that “in the 1960s, young British musicians played blues. Now Jack White and John Mayer do.” She then goes on to ask, “why do you think more young musicians don't play blues?” Clark, himself a relatively young black man, whose music is informed by many genres—including R&B, rock, hip hop, and the blues—responds with a racial and historical corollary, “Well, for a black male, the sound of the blues is pre-Civil Rights. It's oppression.” “In high school,” he continues:

I had a friend who asked me why I played the blues, that black people don't play blues. And for the most part, he was right. But I said, how can you abandon what we come from? All the stuff that you're jamming to [now] came from this foundation. Jimmy Reed sang "Big Boss Man," and, as a black man, he sang that because he couldn't say it in the workplace. He sang that and had people dancing to it. If guys like that were ballsy enough to put that out, how can you deny it? That was the foundation to be able to say whatever the fuck you want. And that stuff sounds as good as it did when I first heard it. (qtd. in Robinson)

Clark positions the blues as the soundtrack to pre-civil rights black experience. Blues allows performers to lyrically express their dissatisfaction with the way they have been treated, and that type of "ballsy" resistance is used to inform and entertain the community. The blues isn't itself oppression but, instead, an expression borne out of the oppression thrust upon black Americans. The blues is a part of black history and part of the foundation not just to musical free speech but to popular music more broadly—a direct influence on white British musicians and eventually Mayer and White.

The takeaway from the Clark interview is twofold. First, Clark, a self-proclaimed "savior of the blues," is unwilling to allow Robinson to white-wash the music in the way her question seeks to.²⁸ By framing iterations of blues musicianship through the British invasion and current white guitar aficionados and blues enthusiasts—Mayer and White—Robinson suggests that blues have been taken up and maintained by white musicians. She actively ignores the blues' rich

²⁸ Clark claims to be a "savior of blues" on his personal website. Here are the first few sentences in full: "Ever since 2010, when Gary Clark Jr. wowed audiences with electrifying live sets everywhere from the Crossroads Festival to Hollywood's historic Hotel Café, his modus operandi has remained crystal clear: 'I listen to everything . . . so I want to play everything.' The revelation that is the Austin-born virtuoso guitarist, vocalist and songwriter finds him just as much an amalgamation of his myriad influences and inspirations. Anyone who gravitated towards Clark's, 2011's *Bright Lights EP*, heard both the evolution of rock and roll and a *savior of blues*" (emphasis added).

historical repertoire of black male and female musicians. Clark proposes that, even though black people have come to see the blues as expressive of a moment of *de jure* oppression, there is a continuing value to the music based on an aesthetics of talking back: voicing your displeasure, frustrations, and anger lyrically in the face of inequity. In that vein, Clark names Jimmy Reed's original version of "Big Boss Man" as a nod to the appropriative moves of the white music industry and refuses to name Elvis Presley, who popularized the song for white audiences.²⁹ The second takeaway is that Clark's response articulates how the blues, despite being from and of the past, somehow still informs and interrupts the present. And part of that is memorialized in an embodied behavior, a *blues ethos*, that resists the oppression of black experience and expression under racially stratified systems—broadly Jim Crow, but also, more specifically, inequitable working conditions, lack of education, inaccessible healthcare, redlining, and predatory mortgage practices.

What Robinson's question gestures at, however, is a perceived decline of contemporary black musicians who are interested in the blues. There are, to be clear, black musicians who continue to produce blues music. Some more traditional black blues musicians are Robert Cray, Gary Clark Jr., Keb' Mo', and Christone "Kingfish" Ingram. There are also a few black musicians who see themselves at the vanguard of blues music that defies the expectations of the genre. In the fall of 2018, Chris Thomas King, a contemporary blues musician, wrote an incendiary open letter in response to his removal from the 2019 Grammy Awards ballot for "Best Contemporary Blues Album." King was told that his *Hotel Voodoo* (2018) "wasn't a blues

²⁹ A missing piece here is understanding how the music industry actively created a sonic color line that allowed for financial control of what was disseminated and to whom. For more on this, see Karl Hagstrom Miller's *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (2010). See also Jennifer Stoecker's *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening* (2016).

In his essay "Elvis Presley and the Politics of Popular Memory," Michael T. Bertrand investigates black reactions to Elvis and his engagement with and appropriation of the black community.

album” and that he “wasn’t a blues artist.” In 2018, British rock band The Rolling Stones won the Grammy award for Best Traditional Blues Album for their *Blue & Lonesome*. Considering how black musicians have seen their music defined in a way that extrudes it from a narrowly defined “blues” category and thus excludes it from awards consideration, King argues that white musicians have appropriated the musical form and have cultivated the genre in such a way that it has stagnated. For a black musician to play blues in a recognizable fashion, in King’s mind, he must perform a romanticized type of blackness. In his words: “according to the Grammy’s pseudo-criteria, minstrelsy is the tradition I should be perpetuating to be on their ballot as a blues artist.” King’s exasperation and overall exhaustion with the Grammy Awards and the limitations of genre gatekeeping more broadly suggests that it is worth considering the evolution of blues from strict genre restrictions.

This same sentiment animates young blues musician Adia Victoria’s argument that “white people” have “gone and goofed” when they claim that the blues is just a “sound.”³⁰ Masked as seemingly “natural” generic restrictions, white expectations for what the blues are and how they can be recognized have stunted our understanding of how the blues manifest in black expression—in music as well as literature. Concerns about a decline in black blues musicians is more indicative of the decline of a recognizable blues “sound” than it is of a blues expressivity. In a discussion about blues and how it informs African American Literature and experience more broadly, Derrick Harriell, an established blues poet, suggests that listening for the “blues to manifest in a certain way” will deafen us to “so many echoes” of the form.³¹ Searching out these

³⁰ Kalamu ya Salaam makes a similar argument in his “the blues aesthetic,” where he claims that the “blues aesthetic is an ethos of blues people that manifests itself in everything done, not just in the music” (7).

³¹ Harriell’s joint interview with Pulitzer prize-winning poet Tyehimba Jess was facilitated by Vietnamese American writer E. M. Tran for *New Ohio Review*. They discuss the blues in depth, as well as representation, black masculinity, and poetry.

reverberations, representations, and invocations of the blues illuminates how daily black life continues to be influenced by a lasting black expressive form, where the past informs what it means to be black today.

Listening for the echoes of the blues in contemporary African American novels, this chapter diverges from the ways we may expect to see the blues manifest as literary form. Contemporary representations of the blues depart from iterations of the blues found in August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1982) and *Seven Guitars* (1992), Alice Walker's *Color Purple* (1982), Gayl Jones' *Corregidora* (1975), and Albert Murray's *Train Whistle Guitar* (1974), texts that memorialize the blues as concurrent with Jim Crow, apartheid and legalized black oppression. Twenty-first century African American novels, at least in the samples I provide below, show their blues influences in a range of new and unfamiliar ways. The blues, at once contemporary and ancestral, resonates and continues to express black experience in Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* (2011), Kiese Laymon's *Long Division* (2013), and James Hannaham's *Delicious Foods* (2015). These texts are set in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century US South, are centered on the inescapability of the past, and are haunted by loss and decay propagated by socio-economic destitution, federal inequity, and the devastated landscape left behind by Hurricane Katrina—arguably this generation of authors' 1927 flood. In these texts, blues is represented by a long-in-the-tooth blues musician who signals the disappearing black blues audience, by music that connects to a lost and inaccessible past, and by an overarching ethos, a way of reckoning with the challenges of surviving in an antiblack nation. The blues are a mode of narrative remembering, recapitulating the precarities of black life as a means of recovering personal, social, and cultural memory.

Blues Narratives and Precarity

In her essay “When the Lights Shut Off: Kendrick Lamar and the Decline of the Black Blues Narrative” (2013), Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah presents the decline of the blues narrative in contemporary African American literature as concurrent with the bifurcation of blackness into race and class during the assumed post-racial years of the Obama presidency. While class hierarchal structures in black communities have persisted since black emancipation (from W. E. B. Du Bois’ Talented Tenth and Alain Locke’s New Negro to contemporary expressions of respectability politics amongst the black community), Kaadzi Ghansah argues that Kendrick Lamar’s release of *good kid, m.A.A.d City* (2012) was concurrent with a “time when black American literature has become splintered between battling narratives: the haves and the have nots.” Noting the publication of Colson Whitehead’s *Sag Harbor* (2009), Thomas Chatterton Williams’ *Losing My Cool: How a Father’s Love and 15,000 Books Beat Hip-Hop Culture* (2011), Touré’s *Whose Afraid of Post-Blackness? What it Means to be Black Now* (2011), and Zadie Smith’s “F. Kafka, Everyman” (2008), Kaadzi Ghansah argues that there was a turn to consider “blackness” as an “identity that many people seemed keen to shed, especially since sometime towards the end of the 20th century, it had become a set of prescriptive, problematic behaviors born out of prison and hip-hop culture, with both of those things acting as a wall to a prouder history.” The “haves” don’t want to be limited by stereotypes of blackness that are equated with lack: poverty, drugs, and violence. In the search for a “more fluid racial self” the more vulnerable black citizens threatened by socio-economic precarity were either left behind or used as a foil to distinguish a middle to upper class iteration of blackness.³²

³² This is especially true in the case Thomas Chatterton Williams, who blames a “hip-hop lifestyle” on his skipping class, slapping his girlfriend, and privileging partying over his studies. It isn’t until he changes his attitude and his clothes that he begins to succeed at Georgetown. The levels of privilege to attend a school like Georgetown and the

In the wake of a increasingly multi-dimensional black identity, there was a dearth of black literary representation that focused on impoverished and vulnerable black citizens in urban and rural settings. Kaadzi Ghansah argues that the new black literary generation she saw emerging stimulated a market for urban fiction, one that is increasingly “vampirisitic” in its preying on a readership starved to see themselves represented on the page. Authors like Sister Souljah and Teri Woods write “gritty, salacious urban fiction about fast cars, drug dealers, and women full of aspiration who were not afraid to use sex or guns to achieve their ends.” Kaadzi Ghansah disparages the genre of urban fiction for being “busy with crime, light on plot, and initially messy with copy errors” and especially because it chooses readerly pleasure over realistically dealing with the intersections of race and class in contemporary America. Lamar’s music in *good kid, m.A.A.d city*, Kaadzi Ghansah suggests, responds to the forgotten black underclass and provides a more nuanced narrative of black urban life. For Kaadzi Ghansah, Lamar’s album is a “memento mori haunted by dead and living ghosts” due to the way he captures and expresses a collection of black voices that have been wracked by the war on drugs, gang violence, and drug addiction. “To hear Kendrick Lamar,” Kaadzi Ghansah writes:

is to hear a hope chest of these voices unleashed; they are his arsenal, and because he has lived near them and collected and stored them all, he has become their imperator. At times Lamar laments that he is not a better soldier. But what Lamar does differently is to tell us of what it means to grow up as an observer and witness to an under-discussed

reliance on respectability politics are lost on Williams. He is unable to recognize that trying on an identity as a means of making himself feel tough or “ghetto” has more to say about his ideas of impoverished urban black experience than it does about the black precariat. At a certain point we have to confront the fact that he scapegoated his being a shitty person with an identity.

inner-city war, while remaining for the most part uninterested in joining the battle. He instead sings a tender blues for the permanently underclass.

Kaadzi Ghansah conceptualizes Lamar's blues within the blues aesthetic established by Ralph Ellison. Frequently quoted in relation to literary representations of the blues, Ellison, responding to the aesthetic he saw emerge in Richard Wright's *Black Boy* (1945), writes that the blues "is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically" (78-9).³³ Ellison's explication of the blues has been deemed a "classic definition" (Ferris 541) that "theorizes blues expressiveness with eloquent and indelible concision" (Gussow, "Finger the Jagged Grain" 138). While Adam Gussow argues that Ellison's definition can be broadened through understanding iterations of "southern blues violence" borne out in both blue music and blues literature, William Ferris suggests that Ellison's formulation "argues that both Wright's life and his literary canon chronicle *folk worlds*" (emphasis added, 541).³⁴

Ellison's definition of the blues is an explanation of the ways in which narrativizing memory—remembering, more broadly—renders the "brutal experience[s]" of black life as subject for expression. So, yes, different types of violence—from systemic to personal—enacted on black people have engendered blues feelings. But the more pressing concern is how are these experiences expressed? And for whom? Ferris's assertion that Ellison chronicles "folk worlds"

³³ In his 2003 essay "'Fingering the Jagged Grain': Ellison's Wright and the Southern Blues Violence," Adam Gussow observes that *Black Boy* "neglects—indeed, refuses—to represent the blues culture that was thriving in the Mississippi and Arkansas of Wright's youth, and contains nary a trace of the 'humble blues lyric[s]' Ellison invokes" (140).

³⁴ Gussow writes, "Yet the southern violence of which I speak is, I would argue, a more comprehensive influence on black blues lives, blues feelings . . . This violence consists of three distinct but interlocking violences, which might be termed *disciplinary* violence, *retributive* violence, and *intimate* violence" (142-3).

asks us to consider the ways in which the blues have chronicled, and continue to chronicle, the daily experience of black people, their communities, and surrounding environments—affirming in many ways the vernacular theory outlined by Houston Baker. Note that the quotidian is not simply a catchall for the monotonous work that must be completed within the day, but, instead it is the “practice of everyday life,” the “tactics of resistance, modes of self-fashioning, and figurations of freedom” (Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* [1997] 11). To “finger that jagged grain,” then, is to remember the wound and to carry it forward, manipulate it into narrative, into lyric, and to say: this is my story, this is where I come from, this is my community, here is how I and we came to be.

Lamar’s “autobiographical” album, Kaadzi Ghansah asserts, “is so novelistic and so eloquently anchored in the literary blues tradition of which Ellison wrote.” Lamar is “equal parts oral historian and authorial presence, and more than many authors writing today, he has captured all of the pathos and grief of gun violence, poverty, and the families who carve their lives out amidst all of that chaos.” “Lamar,” Kaadzi Ghanasah continues:

has offered up his hymnal for a lost generation, a defense for the black family, and in his jumpy prosody, his shell-shocked sensitivities, his clipped memories, and recorded conversations, he has produced “a novel from life” that single-handedly revives the long lost, suppressed literary tradition of young, working-class black boys on fire, with pens smote in hell, telling us how they become gifted, tenderhearted, black men—something we have been missing even though no one seems to notice it.

Kaadzi Ghansah’s reading of Lamar’s music asks us to recognize the power and nuance of black voices that are so often distilled into simplified narratives characterized by words like poor, violent, thug, dangerous, or valueless. Blues as an aesthetic and as a music has an enduring

presence that speaks against these stereotypes. Combined, blackness and poverty signify on long-enduring cultural development, which has currently garnered more and more national and international attention—consider two-time National Book award winning author Jesmyn Ward and Donald Glover’s critically acclaimed television show *Atlanta* (2016-) for example.³⁵ In her reading of Kendrick Lamar, Kaadzi Ghansah explains that what he carries forward, his musical inheritance, is that there “is no making sense of this nonsense” of what black people are forced to confront daily: “It is a blues: near-tragic, near-comic, and it can make one anxious, oppositional, or emotional.”

Kaadzi Ghansah’s compelling reading helps clarify the ways in which the blues manifest in contemporary black art. Lamar’s blues provides an in-depth representation of urban black life in southern California. More broadly, his music shines a light on the precarity of black life and the socio-economic fallout that has wracked his community from the post-world war years to Reagan’s war on drugs to the militarization of police, mass incarceration and the ensuing gang violence. The genesis of gang violence and precarity in Lamar’s section of the city, South Central Los Angeles, has been well-documented in African American film. Charles Burnett’s *Killer of Sheep* (1978) depicts a solidly lower-middle-class black neighborhood filled with families trying their best to get by. The main character, Stan, works at a slaughterhouse, and the emotional toil of that work seeps into his daily life. The film “offers no solutions; it merely presents life—sometimes hauntingly bleak, sometimes filled with transcendent joy and gentle humor” (“Killer of Sheep”). John Singleton’s *Boyz n the Hood* (1991) showed the South Central neighborhood of Crenshaw wracked by drug abuse, gang violence, and over-policing. In the

³⁵ Jesmyn Ward won her first National Book Award for *Salvage the Bones* (2011) in 2011 and her second for *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017) in 2017.

Donald Glover’s *Atlanta* (2016-) has been nominated for and won numerous awards including Emmy Awards, Peabody awards, and NAACP Image Awards.

opening sequence, a young Tre, accompanied by some friends, comes across an old murder scene with stagnant blood on the ground and posters for “Reagan Bush ’84” riddled with bullets. The lack of opportunity depicted in *Killer of Sheep*, made more complex by the later implementation of racist conservative politics seen in *Boyz n the Hood*, has decimated the neighborhood. By 2013, Kendrick Lamar’s album offers the third chapter in the chronicle of a black urban neighborhood left to drown.

Not only does Lamar’s album evoke the lived realities of the people who make up his community, but he also presents a vulnerable individual at the center of his music asking to be remembered. Kaadzi Ghansah explains that Lamar is “young, but also old enough to know that nothing in life is promised for men like him except death.” With an understanding that death is inevitable, Lamar’s only desire is to be remembered. In “Sing About Me, Dying of Thirst,” Lamar sings: “When the lights shut off, and it’s my turn to settle down, my main concern, promise that you will sing about me.” Preoccupied with his “infatuation with death,” Lamar enters a tradition of blues musicians, like Robert Johnson and Son House, performing their own elegies, hoping to be remembered by a world they’ve left behind.³⁶

The act of remembering for black Americans is itself a political form of resistance that harkens to the overwhelming losses of familial structures, culture, and tradition engendered by the institution of chattel slavery. In her *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2007), Saidiya Hartman turns to Africa and to the archive to piece together the lost histories of those enslaved. She is not interested in seeking out the “ancestral village” as a means

³⁶ Robert Johnson’s music is preoccupied with dying, sex, and judgement day. As part of a way to ensure he is remembered, he inserts his name, “Bob” and “Mr. Johnson,” into a couple of his songs. Son House’s “Death Letter Blues” is an elegy for a dead partner who he has “let down.” The blues find him at night when he is all alone.

Additionally, beyond the two blues musicians named, Richard Wright had written some blues songs at the behest of John Hammond. In one of his songs, he wrote, “If anyone asks you who made up this song, Tell ’em it was Richard Wright, done been here and gone” (qtd. in Ferris).

of recuperating a site of familial genesis or life before slavery. Instead, Hartman seeks out the “barracoon,” the hold where slaves were kept on the continent of Africa (6). She “traveled to Ghana in search of the expendable and the defeated” (7). Her project is to recover a history of slavery whose narrative has heretofore been written through the archive, a place that “dictates what can be said about the past and the kinds of stories that can be told about the persons cataloged, embalmed, and sealed away in box files and folios. To read the archive is to enter a mortuary; it permits one final viewing and allows for a last glimpse of persons about to disappear into the slave hold” (17). Hartman wants to uncover and recover those lost to slavery. She wants to remember them and create a record because “slavery made the past a mystery, unknown and unspeakable” (14).³⁷

Not only does slavery have a history that obscures black familial and cultural connections to the past, its legacies have perpetuated inequity and enforced precarity on black Americans into the present. Defying conservative exasperation that black people should “just get over it,” Hartman explains that if “slavery persists as an issue in the political life of black America, it is not because of an antiquarian obsession with bygone days or the burden of a too-long memory, but because black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago” (*Lose Your Mother* 6). The ways in which slavery continue to haunt black life now is what Hartman calls “the afterlife of slavery” where black people are confronted with “skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment” based on the color of their skin and the

³⁷ While both Dionne Brand and M NourbeSe Philip are black Canadians, some of their work has attempted to understand the ruptures of slavery and those enslaved who have been erased by their objectification. See Brand’s *A Map to the Door of No Return* (2001) and Philip’s *Zong!* (2008).

lasting stain of forced servitude (6). Slavery and its afterlives leave black citizens in a state of constant precarity “to survive (and more) the afterlife of property” (Sharpe 18).

The precariousness imposed on black Americans is part of an organizing logic that reduces the possibilities and protections of black citizenry. In “Precarity in the Era of #BlackLivesMatter,” civil rights activist and attorney Sean Hill II explains that “Black Americans have occupied the role of *denizens* since first arriving on America’s shores as slaves, and even after their *de jure* release from bondage” (emphasis added 96). To be a denizen is to be an occupant of a land “denied at least one of the rights afforded true citizens, e.g., civil, cultural, social, economic, and political rights” (96). Hill argues that denizen status continues into the era of Jim Crow, noting how black Americans “were not treated equally before the law, not protected against crime and physical harm, not entitled to income-earning activity, and not granted an equal right to vote” (96-7). Moving into the “age of neoliberalism,” Hill explains that the “ever-growing prison and policing systems act[] as the primary vehicles for the routine denial of basic rights to black Americans” (97). Additionally, the ways in which black Americans have been denied political and economic enfranchisement has been through voter suppression, which has transformed into “pervasive felony disenfranchisement,” “rampant discrimination in housing access,” and “severe employment disparities.” Together these oppressions “undercut any claims of equal access to the various forms of state-sponsored social protection” (97).³⁸ The lasting damages of chattel slavery are not just borne out through the blackness of one’s skin but are nurtured through a history of systemic disenfranchisement.

³⁸ To help establish his claims, Hill cites a plethora of sources, including Elizabeth Hinton’s “From ‘War on Crime’ to War on the Black Community: The Enduring impact of President Johnson’s Crime Commission” (2016), Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010), Joe Davidson’s “6 Million Citizens, Including 1 in 13 African Americans, Are Blocked from Voting because of Felonies” (2016), Ta-Nehisi Coates’ “The Case for Reparations” (2014), and Drew Desilver’s “Black Unemployment Rate is Consistently Twice that of Whites” (2013).

To live in the wake of slavery, as Christina Sharpe eloquently articulates it, is to constantly resist subjection even as it is enacted. The critical space that emerges, however, is two-fold: first, black experience and life is not bereft of joy or pleasure. Considering contemporary black life as “in the wake of slavery” can be quickly seen to limit the possibility of black life. Sharpe's vision offers a version of afro-pessimism, where to be a black subject is to recognize the fatalism of immanent and imminent black death.³⁹ She explains that “even as we experienced, recognized, and lived subjection, we did not *simply* or *only* live *in* subjection and *as* the subjected” (*In the Wake* 4). The second critical space is one of resistance and struggle that encounters, deconstructs, and represents the systems and institutions that limit black life to show how these limitations are continuations of the oppressive structures of slavery that haunt black being. Sharpe deems this type of resistance and representation as “wake work,” which is a “mode of inhabiting *and* rupturing this episteme with our known lived and un/imaginable lives” (18). “At stake,” for Sharpe’s project, “is to stay in this wake time toward inhabiting a blackened consciousness that would rupture the structural silences produced and facilitated by, and that produce and facilitate, Black social and physical death” (22).

The way in which the past ruptures the present and demands to be remembered falls in line with Ralph Ellison’s “fingering the jagged grain.” For Ellison, to “transcend” the “brutal experience[s]” of black life is to encounter the ruptures and realities of the past to *(re)member*—finger the jagged grain—those events artistically (“lyrically”). Sharpe says it another way:

³⁹ In his “The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism” (2013), Jared Sexton argues that “afro-pessimism is ‘not but nothing other than’ black optimism” because of the indelibly connected relationship of anti-blackness and blackness—one cannot exist without the other. In this way, the most “radical negation of the anti-black world is the most radical affirmation of a blackened world” (73). Resistance and struggle are always already affirmations of existing.

I've been trying to articulate a method of encountering a past that is not past. A method along the lines of a sitting with, a gathering, and a tracking of phenomena that disproportionately and devastatingly affect Black peoples any and everywhere we are. I've been thinking of this gathering, this collecting and reading toward a new analytic, as the wake and wake work, and I am interested in plotting, mapping, and collecting the archives of the everyday of Black immanent and imminent death, and in tracking the ways we resist, rupture, and disrupt that immanence and imminence aesthetically and materially. (13)

Sharpe's "new analytic," the "wake and wake work," is much like the blues as described by Ellison. By investigating the ways in which black experience is "disproportionately and devastatingly" affected by slavery and its afterlives, she fingers the jagged grain of the ruptures of the past in her "aching consciousness" and expresses that experience "aesthetically and materially." Following Sharpe's new analytic, the blues are a means of encountering a "past that is not past, a past that is with us still; a past that cannot and should not be pacified in its presentation" (62) in the hopes that the present can be better understood, or at least endured.

Blues and Remembering

In the remainder of this chapter, I will investigate the ways in which the afterlives of slavery—a specific, highly significant dimension of the past—continue to interrupt and inform contemporary African American literature and how those ruptures are articulated through the blues. Encountering the past in its various permutations, even while continuing to live in the present, is at the heart of James Hannaham's *Delicious Foods* (2015), Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* (2011), and Kiese Laymon's *Long Division* (2013). These novels use the ruptures

engendered by the past and the enduring history of slavery and its afterlives to express the lived precarity of young black children in the US Deep South. The representation of blues music and aesthetics in these novels provides a potent means of expression that adds nuance to contemporary black identity as well as resists the limitations imposed upon black Americans in a “post-racial” United States that turns out to be nothing of the sort.

The sociologist and public intellectual, Zandria Robinson argues that the US South has “risen again as the geographic epicenter of authentic black identity” (1). Tongue-in-cheek, Robinson winks at her subversion of the white “South-shall-rise-again” trope as well at the idea of an “authentic” black identity. What she asserts is, and to echo the words of Andre 3000 after Outkast won Best New Rap Group at the 1995 Source Awards, “the South got something to say.” In recent years, the US Deep South has produced numerous acclaimed young black musicians, actors, filmmakers, and authors. In her book, *This Ain’t Chicago: Race, Class, and Regional Identity in the Post-Soul South* (2014), Robinson explains, as she explores how black Memphians understand their blackness and how southern blackness is represented in popular culture, that she must remain “attentive to the ways in which the past—in varying forms—both *is* and *interrupts* the contemporary South” (4, emphasis in original). Using the term “post-soul,” popularized by the cultural critic Nelson George and later taken up by Mark Anthony Neal, Robinson proposes a “post-soul blues” where she “uses blues and its descendant form hip-hop as the language through which to understand contemporary black life . . . in the South.” She continues, “aesthetically and culturally, post-soul blues is the musical and bodily lexicon of black southern life in the post-civil rights era. Politically, this post-soul blues is a set of performative narratives utilized to navigate the contemporary contradictions of the South and racial progress” (62). Informed by the weight of the past, Robinson’s “post-soul blues” is a means of expressing both where you’ve

come from and where you're going—cultural memory and individual remembering are part of everyday life.⁴⁰ Focusing on the cultural production and the cultural memories from the Deep South allows for the investigation of black experience for those who stayed during the Great Migration. The blues, the music borne of the Deep South and rural black experience, provides access to that history.

James Hannaham's *Delicious Foods*, winner of a PEN/Faulkner award, is a contemporary neo-slave narrative that details the complicated relationship between mother and son, one mediated by addiction and substance abuse, all while exposing the ongoing enslavement of vulnerable peoples on US farms. The novel is split among three narratives. Eddie Hardison, the young protagonist, is on a journey to find Darlene, his drug-addicted mother. Darlene Hardison's narrative details her enslavement on the neo-plantation Delicious Foods, occupied by predominantly black and Hispanic workers trapped in Plantation Country Louisiana by their drug addictions and trumped up debts to the company store.⁴¹ Scotty, the third narrator and the personification of crack cocaine, who, speaking in an urban vernacular, is smart, edgy, and surprisingly sympathetic. He keeps Darlene addicted by masking her problems, which are

⁴⁰ The blues also have a personal resonance for Robinson. In her essay, "Listening for the Country: The Shape of Daddy's Hurt," Robinson outlines how she was raised to consider the blues to be "country," to be uncivilized and low-class. But that country mentality is also lovingly connected to her father from the Mississippi Delta. The blues become a vehicle for her to access her recently deceased father and to consider the ways in which his life engendered blues feelings: "Listening to that music in the wake of Daddy's death . . . I was compelled to consider for the first time the shape of Daddy's hurt—and his right to it. He had hurt Mama and the rest of us, but I had not given him space to hurt, not about anything, really, beyond a stubbed toe. His upbringing in Jim Crow Mississippi with disappearances and violences and the concomitant beatings from Big Mama Rosie. A missed scholarship opportunity because a racist counselor hadn't turned in a form. His visit to Memphis that was only supposed to be a stop on the way to St. Louis that turned out to be an entire life and abrupt death. His guilt about what he had done to Mama, or to us" (91). Robinson then goes on to wonder if her father listened to Bobby Blue Bland for the "country," the space of his upbringing, or if "he just needed someone who sonically and ontologically knew his regret and guilt and sorrow and heartbreak" (92). While Robinson's ruminations on her father's love of blues music do not provide her any concrete answers about his relationship with the music, they do allow her the space to remember and consider her father in a new light, one that takes into account his flaws but also the ways those flaws affected him.

⁴¹ Louisiana has five distinct regions: Sportsman's Paradise, Crossroads, Cajun Country, Plantation Country, and the Greater New Orleans Area.

plentiful. The novel is set in Houston, Texas, the farmland of Louisiana, and St. Cloud, Minnesota.

As the novel begins, Eddie is driving a stolen Subaru with the stumps of his arms. His hands have been cut off. He is dizzy from blood loss and sways across highway lanes while escaping northward from an unknown location in the heart of Louisiana to St. Cloud, Minnesota, because the name “sounded to him like heaven” (4). Hannaham takes a cue from other neo-slave narratives like Octavia Butler’s novel *Kindred* (1979), which begins with Dana, the female protagonist, regaining consciousness in the hospital after her arm was amputated in the antebellum past. Butler’s novel reminds us how the past of slavery still haunts and dismembers black communities, including how families are broken apart by the prison industrial complex and violence and how neighborhoods are destroyed by ghettoization and, recently, gentrification. Hannaham’s contemporary slave narrative, however, has Eddie dismembered in the present, setting the tone early that the past continues to haunt and inform the present. *Delicious Foods*, based on the oppressive and discriminatory practices of large-scale industrial farms that prey on the most vulnerable members of society—usually illegal immigrants or, in the case of this novel, people with drug addictions—is concerned with the very real and very current slavery in the US.⁴²

In an interview with John Bowe, aptly named “It’s Not Even Past” (2015), Hannaham explains that that he was influenced to write *Delicious Foods* after having read Bowe’s book, *Nobodies: Modern American Slave Labor and the Dark Side of the New Global Economy* (2008).

⁴² Barry Estabrook’s *Tomatoland* (2011) is a particularly in-depth investigation of present-day slavery in the US. Estabrook focuses on illegal migrants from Mexico and Central and South American countries in the tomato fields of Florida.

The exploitative practices used to ensnare a labor force typically begin with a “corrupt farm send[ing] a van,” in which:

their management team convinces cash-strapped African Americans, or poor illegal Mexican immigrants, or any marginalized people who can easily be manipulated [into believing] that a great opportunity awaits them: picking fruit, harvesting crops, tending the soil. It’s a vague offer. On false pretenses — a livable wage, steady employment, good living facilities — these men and women are persuaded into the van, and they’re driven to the middle of nowhere. They’re so far away from any place that they can’t escape, even if they want to do so.

Once they arrive at the farm, they’re told they owe a couple hundred dollars for the trip, and they’ll have to pay for room and board as well. They fall into debt. Almost at once, they see that the conditions promised aren’t the conditions in which they arrived. Over time, they realize they’ve become enslaved. Those in charge keep them oppressed with various kinds of disorientation. Violence is popular. A language barrier can exist. Often, the recruits have a drug addiction, and management provides them with a constant fix on credit, causing them to fall further into debt. (qtd. in Bowe)

Once Hannaham understood how the most precarious members of contemporary American society are easily victimized by industrial farms, he began to see “everything on a continuum of labor abuse.” Much like Hartman’s afterlives of slavery, or Sharpe’s living in the wake, Hannaham experienced what he calls “temporal dread.” He explains that “slavery, for instance is continuing to happen to the same demographic: the same people, African Americans, and the same location, the South . . . The ‘original sin’ of America hasn’t disappeared.” Furthering our understanding of the afterlives of slavery, Bowe explains that “since the legal abolition of

slavery, certain industries, especially agriculture, have gone on trying to figure out how to get cheap or free labor. This has meant tenant farming, chain gangs, imported labor from the Caribbean, undocumented Mexicans and Central Americans.” Bowe illuminates how the technology of slavery and the capitalistic drive to secure free or cheap labor has evolved to include not solely black Americans but also the nation’s most vulnerable members. Hannaham’s novel uses this contemporary form of slavery via debt-peonage for the narrative structure of his *Delicious Foods*.

Slavery, however, is only part of Darlene and Eddie’s tumultuous experience. Hannaham also shows the damages wrought at the hands of white supremacists, including mob violence, as manifestations of the status quo. Darlene’s husband and Eddie’s father, Nat, was murdered in their family-owned and operated store. It was burned to the ground with his body still inside. No charges were filed against the perpetrators. Nat’s store, Mount Hope Grocery, was a black bastion in rural Louisiana, and he “spoke out in the local media against David Duke, the former Klansman who became a member of the House of Representatives” (119).⁴³ Soon after, Darlene and Nat started to receive death threats, including “*We gonna string you up, nigger. Make your ass a human piñata*” (119 emphasis in original). As a narrative technique, the disciplinary violence in the novel recalls the terrifying years after emancipation but before Civil Rights ratification, where black people were victimized by the domestic terrorism through which segregation was enforced. The violence enacted on black people and its effects on black families doesn’t disappear after the Civil Rights Movement; David Duke was a member of the Louisiana

⁴³ David Duke is a well-known white supremacist and was formerly the Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan. In Spike Lee’s *BlacKkKlansman* (2018), Duke is played by Topher Grace, and he is duped into accepting a black police officer, Ron Stallworth, played by John David Washington, into the Klan. Based on the true story, Stallworth infiltrates the Klan and stops an act of domestic terrorism. The film depicts Duke as overly confident in his ability to know whiteness to the point of hubris.

House of Representatives from 1989 to 1992. Instead, the cycle of black subjugation and enforced precarity continues into the present. After Nat's lynching, Darlene feels helpless and falls victim to white-controlled social structures. The police were ineffective in their investigation and Darlene rightfully notes that "you couldn't call the police on the police" (119). When the men who attacked Nat later enter the convenience store where Darlene works, she faints. Despite being college educated and intelligent, Darlene looks for an escape and finds it in Scotty, the embodied spirit of crack cocaine.

Despite the bleakness of its topics—slavery, drug addiction, lynching, broken families, and terrible violence—the novel leavens tragedy with humor and rests on a narrative of survival rather than defeat. In Stephen Best's 2016 interview for *Public Books*, he asks Hannaham about the mixture of humor with the very serious topic of slavery. Hannaham responds:

It's not just humorous. It's intended to mix all of those things and fuck your shit up. Because that's what life does to you. I don't think that there's all that much difference between tragedy and comedy. And that's the line that I've . . . that I'm really interested in walking. Because one of the ways of dealing with horrific things that seem impossible to deal with is to make light of them. That's one of the only ways you can get through some shit. And it was actually one of the only ways I could get through writing the book myself. (n.p., ellipsis in original)

Hannaham's wry and often ironic humor highlights the absurdity of the repeated onslaught of terrible violences enacted on the novel's black and brown characters. For example, Eddie has a natural talent for repairing machines. After he escapes from Delicious Foods, with both hands removed at the wrists, he fashions a pair of claws and finds lucrative work as a handyman fixing household items that people would normally throw away. He understands that he was seen as a

“novelty” but “translated the amazement in [his customers’] faces into a stable income” (18). Eventually Viv, a young red-haired white girl, observes that Eddie is a “handyman without hands” (19). Eddie laughs at this and makes this his brand: “When he thought of the phrase, Eddie didn’t mind that it reduced his troubles to a friendly, manageable quirk. The funny, contradictory label covered up all the loss and the pain and made it so that customers could approach him with a feeling of comfort and friendliness” (20). Although the entire image is quite sad—a young black man hiding behind his disability to seem approachable—Eddie sees the humor of his situation as a way of enabling consistent income and triumphing over adversity, moving forward instead of being pulled down by the pain of his circumstances.

Hannaham’s use of humor to soften the blows of the deadly daily realities of his characters is an example of the blues trope laughing-to-keep-from-crying. For Hannaham, “humor is a method of survival” (qtd. in Bowe). In his famous essay, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” (1926), Langston Hughes writes that the “Negro artist can give his racial individuality, his heritage of rhythm and warmth, and his incongruous humor that so often, as in the Blues, becomes ironic laughter mixed with tears” (810). James Baldwin, in his “The Use of the Blues” (1964), says it another way:

And there’s something funny—there’s always something a little funny in all our disasters, if one can face the disaster. So that it’s this passionate detachment, this inwardness coupled with outwardness, this ability to know that, all right, it’s a mess, and you can’t do anything about it . . . so, well, you have to do something about it [. . .] It’s what makes life bearable for any person, because every person, everybody born, from the time he’s found out about people until the whole thing is over, is certain of one thing: he is going to suffer. There is no way not to suffer. (73)

In Kalamu ya Salaam's "the blues aesthetic," he explains that the "the combination of exaggeration and conscious recognition of the brutal facts of life is the basis for the humor of blues people, which is real black humor" (15-6). Hughes, Baldwin, and Salaam recognize that laughing-to-keep-from-crying is itself a survival technique in the face of the afterlives of slavery. They aren't simply talking about the blues as a musical form here, but as a functional mode of self-expression, self-making, and survival. Finding the humor in the day's struggle is a means of owning that pain and moving forward. The lesson is that there is no other choice but to keep on living or to die right here and now. So you better keep on living.

Using incongruous humor, however, is not the only way Hannaham incorporates the blues into *Delicious Foods*. After Darlene has been taken to work on the farm, Eddie searches for her in Houston's impoverished and dilapidated neighborhoods. At this moment in the novel, Eddie is only twelve years old. He is capable of making his way through the neighborhood, but he is alone and doesn't have the experience or know-how to find Darlene. He learns of a "death van" that has picked his mother up—so called because whoever enters the van isn't seen again. Searching out clues, Eddie comes across a drunk homeless man who taunts him in an improvised "almost incoherent, mocking blues song" with information about his mother in exchange for "drinkahol" (157). We soon find out that this abrasive drunk is named Tuckahoe Joe. His perhaps odd name is a stage moniker from when he "used to play blues music" but now he "just live the fucking blues" (161). In the 1828 minstrel song "Jump Jim Crow," composed by white blackface minstrel performer T. D. Rice, the singer is from Tuckahoe Plantation, which was Thomas Jefferson's boyhood home and is now protected in "perpetuity" and a popular site for weddings and other celebrations ("The History"). In the case of Hannaham's novel, Tuckahoe Joe's name provides a connection to the history of slavery and the plantation as the center of

black labor production as well as the appropriation of black music and dialects for white entertainment. Tuck, for short, takes Eddie to the van and they continue the odyssey to find Darlene. In the van, “Tuck sang a little but Eddie didn’t recognize the tune. Old folks’ music, he thought. Dead folks’s music” (162). At this point in the novel, Eddie doesn’t recognize the value of blues music or his connection to it. He considers it history, dead and done with. As the novel moves forward, Tuck, resurrected in many ways by Eddie, revives the cultural value of blues music.

Tuck’s battles with alcoholism and crippling loneliness signify on the slow death of blues music’s popularity in the black community. Later in the novel, once they’ve been on the farm for four days, Tuck “described his struggle to make it as a musician” to Eddie. Tuck’s difficulties as a traveling blues musician ranged from “the years of touring” and “sleeping on the same filthy comforter every night in the back of a rickety van” to “playing all night and hav[ing] to split fifty dollars among the six band members, and not evenly, because Mad Dog, his bandleader, demanded a bigger cut,” to “the ominous, deepening evidence that the audience for Mad Dog Walker’s music was literally dying and the leader’s tendency to blame his band for the waning popularity of the blues and harangue them, and sometimes even the thin crowds at shows, during his interminable drug binges.” And finally to “how the stress of all these things made Tuck drink until he didn’t have the strength to do anything but drink, and how even that strength disappeared, how his playing, the activity that had given Tuck the greatest pleasure and kept him going spiritually, though never financially, gradually seemed to take the shape of a noose and begin to tighten around his neck” (188).

The slow demise of blues music’s popularity within black communities, concurrent with the aging and now dying audience, leaves Tuck feeling insignificant, where his music is bereft of

cultural and communal value. Tuck “followed his ambition to the outskirts of its possibility,” where he wasn’t bothered by his poverty, but “he’d expected a certain sense of fulfillment, a measure of respect from his community . . . something unnameable but gratifying, and he’d found that all he had in the end, once Mad Dog and the boys parted ways, was his own stupid life, emptied of significance” (189). Tuck’s desire to play blues music was to find a place of value within his community. He strove to speak for and attest to those that might need his music. He was, instead, left as an individual without a community.

The novel, however, doesn’t give up on the value of blues music. Tuck is given a second chance to use his experience from hard-living and his talent as a blues musician to speak to a community that needs his voice. On the farm, while being pushed by the farm overseers under the hot Louisiana sun, Tuck leads the workers in the fields with blues songs. His music offers a “way to make the work bearable,” in which they “discovered a secret portal to escape the tyranny of their superiors” (230). Because blues songs are built on an antiphonal structure, call and response, where a voice recognizes and responds to another, Tuck’s blues songs remind his fellow workers they are not alone. However, because of the ways the afterlives of slavery continue to haunt black Americans, it becomes deeply unsettling that Tuck’s blues still hold the same cultural value as they did during the post-reconstruction South. The blues were born out of precarity. Coming out of sharecropping and logging and levee camps throughout the Deep South, the blues developed in the places where African Americans “came in search of a better life only to find themselves trapped in an endless cycle of hard work and meager reward amid almost intolerable living and working conditions” (Cobb 278). Extending to the mixture of black, Hispanic, and white drug and alcohol addicted workers at Delicious Foods, Tuck’s blues finds a new audience that rely on his music to help them through the day’s labor. His blues network has

been extended. However, the need for his music becomes a haunting reminder of the ways in which black folks have been and continue to be subjected by agricultural labor practices, where their bodies only have value through output, and how that capitalistic impulse has extended to other precarious communities.

Tuck also becomes a stand-in father figure for Eddie who uses his blues songs like his “Struggling Blues,” “Disgusted Blues,” and “Troubled ‘Bout My Mother” to “stand[] in for what he could never express directly” (230). Unable to tell Eddie the hard truths about his mother Darlene, Tuck lets his songs signify on Eddie’s turbulent relationship with her. Late in the novel, when Eddie has been savagely handcuffed by the overseer, he agrees to have his hands cut off to escape the farm. At that moment, “the songs of Willie ‘Mad Dog’ Walker played loudly in his head”—the songs that Tuck shared with him (293). This moment of great sacrifice for Eddie is a reminder that the cycles of trauma he encounters—murdered father, drug-addicted mother, enslavement, and now dismemberment—are his birthright as a black boy in America. Eddie’s relationship with Tuck connects him to a rich black past filled with unimaginable sacrifice, fear, and pain. Hannaham’s representations of blues music and musicians in *Delicious Foods* signifies on a vibrant past, where the cultural value of blues music is shared with members of a new generation as an expression of perseverance.

While the blues are embodied by an elderly black musician in Hannaham’s novel, Jesmyn Ward’s 2011 National Book Award-winning *Salvage the Bones* uses blues music to signal generational memories of familial love and loss. Set in Bois Sauvage, a small town on the Mississippi Gulf coast, her novel details the experiences of the Batiste family during the ten days leading up to Hurricane Katrina, the storm, and the day after, effectively spanning August 19-30, 2005. The narrative focuses on fifteen-year-old (and recently pregnant) Esch, her brothers

Skeetah, Randall, and Junior, and their alcoholic father, lovingly called Daddy, all of whom live on a parcel of land called The Pit. Ward's novel is about the trauma of loss, the power of motherhood, generational poverty, and the inability to escape the oncoming storm—a storm that is both a real disaster and a window onto the precarity that shadows the entire family. Rose, the children's mother, died seven years earlier due to complications during the birth of the youngest, Junior. Her absence pervades the novel, which leaves Esch unsure of her power as a woman and anxious as a future mother. One of the key themes of the novel is that “bodies tell stories,” even in their absence (83). Their mother may not be present in the novel, but the children's memories of her are found in the ways they move around the Pit and care for each other.

In *Salvage the Bones*, blues music connects the characters to an irretrievable past that acknowledges the experience of the previous generation. Blues music is mentioned early in the book; it's part of the established background of life in the Pit. Some of Randall's and Skeetah's friends talk with Daddy about the oncoming storms that come with hurricane season along the Gulf Coast. Inside the house, Esch cleans herself up in the hope of impressing Manny, the boy with whom she has been having sex. As she prepares to come outside, the sound of “insects singing as they ring the red dirt yard, the bouncing ball, Daddy's blues coming from his truck radio” call her “out the door” (7). On a mimetic level, this iteration of the blues provides a sense of the soundscape of the Pit, where “singing” bugs, the thuds of basketballs hitting the dirt, and blues music are all part of the daily sounds of the space. But note, too, that these are “Daddy's” blues, positioning the music as his—not the music of the children—as well as a metaphorical nudge towards Daddy's emotional state, one in which his blues feelings—as a widower, single-father, and drunk—are signaled from the radio.

Blues music in Ward's novel is part of a complex temporal construct, both present and deeply connected to the past. It also makes up part of the landscape of Bois Sauvage. "The Oaks" is a "blues club set on six acres of woods and a baseball diamond." As part of the local economy and community, the club hosts "baseball games for black town teams every Sunday during the summer" (92). The Oaks is important as a social hub and it functions as a site of memory from which Esch can access her mother. One time, when the children were younger, Randall walked Esch through the blues club to use the washroom. On that day, Esch remembers,

all corners and smoke and the bowling of beer bottles hitting tables, he had gripped my shoulders so hard they hurt. Mama had been on the dance floor; I'd never seen her dance before like that, and I never would again. She was dancing with a man, not Daddy, while Daddy sat at the edge of the floor and watched. She had shook like China, threw her head back so water glistened down her throat, and her body ran in curves when normally she was all solid. She was beautiful. (93)

Not sure of what she has really witnessed, Esch is only able to compare her mother's raw sexual power with the raw violent potential that she sees in China, her brother Skeetah's prize fighting Pitbull.

In the absence of her mother, Esch struggles to understand love, sex, pregnancy, intimacy, and her own strength as a woman. She doesn't have access to the intricacies of a mature relationship that would move beyond lust to provide an equal partnership. Esch instead relies on Skeetah's relationship with China to understand intimacy and female sexuality. After China has given birth to her litter of puppies, Skeetah worries that she and the puppies might get sick. Esch witnesses his administering of their ill-gotten dewormer to China. In her telling of the scene, China's raw violent power—"What tore through the gray dog"—"is now a woman

approaching her partner on the floor of the Oaks, the first lick of the blues guitar sounding from the jukebox, a drink in her hand.” China supplicates herself to Skeetah as he coos to her, “That’s my girl;” “I know my girl;” “Good bitch.” China rests her “front legs on his chest like a lover’s” and “nuzzles the syringe, licks” (101). This scene between Skeetah and China is intimate and sexualized. For Esch, the only other time she has witnessed such raw feminine power was when her mother danced with another man at the blues bar. Esch mixes sex with violence and supplication. The blues, here, act as a sonic reminder for the reader that Esch has no female figures to help her mature as a young woman and value her body as her own.

Ward’s connection of blues with motherhood runs counter to the music of female blues singers of the past. Angela Y. Davis, in her *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (1998), explains that “blues women rarely sang about mothers, fathers, and children.” She continues to argue that the “absence of the mother figure in the blues does not imply a rejection of motherhood as such, but rather suggests that blues women found the mainstream cult of motherhood irrelevant to the realities of their lives” (13). Ward’s novel, however, is deeply invested in depicting the power and importance of mothers as directly related to the reality of the character’s lives. There is a raw power to motherhood that Esch comes to realize through China and then Hurricane Katrina, the “murderous mother who cut [them] to the bone but left [them] alive, left [them] naked and bewildered as newborn babies” (255). Esch feels the power of her mother “present in the absence” (247). The few moments when blues music is present in *Salvage the Bones* signal Esch’s attempts to understand her sexuality and how that overlaps with motherhood. Much in the same way blues music is an integral piece of the cultural landscape of black identity, Ward salvages the bones of the musical form to show how experience and knowledge across generations can be so quickly lost amongst the most precarious members of US society.

Jesmyn Ward's novel is indebted to a heritage of Southern writers. Her work has been compared to that of William Faulkner (her *Bois Sauvage* is seen as a modern-day Yoknapatawpha), Zora Neale Hurston, and Alice Walker. In an interview with Danille K. Taylor, Ward claims that Walker and Hurston helped her realize that "African American southern women writers existed" and they were particularly influential because they "wrote about black southern women" (267). Ward is part of a new generation of black southern writers who have been aligned with the "Dirty South." For Ward, that means:

there's a certain rawness to the art that comes out of it. A certain honesty. A willingness to bring secrets and despair and hope and all those other messy human emotions to life. To express what it means to be born and grow up into the cycle of poverty that has been bequeathed to so many of us. And finally, to reckon with what growing up in this place has affected us, and how we fight against it, sometimes foolhardily, but always with a kind of courage born of desperation. I think that women can speak to those issues just as well as men. The hardships of this life don't discriminate by gender. (267-68)

What she describes here is a black working-class vision of what it means to be from the US South. In terms of the politics of representation, Ward wants to represent her experience as a black woman from Mississippi—a voice we need to hear more of⁴⁴. The weight of the past is tied deeply to her non-fiction and fiction. In an essay for *Time* magazine, she explains that she returned to live in Mississippi because, "even as the South remains troubled by its past, there are people here who are fighting so it can find its way to a healthier future, never forgetting the lessons of its long, brutal history, ever present, ever instructive" (n.p.). Perhaps echoing Faulkner's most famous line, "the past is never dead. It isn't even past," Ward suggests that the

⁴⁴ Some other notable black female Mississippi writers include Anne Moody, Natasha Trethewey, and Unita Blackwell.

best way to change the political, social, racial, and economic landscape of the US South is to understand how its history informs the future. As part of her “wake work,” Ward continues to add narratives of black Mississippi experience indelibly linked to land, trauma, and history to represent and deconstruct the legacy of slavery and its afterlives.⁴⁵

Part of the lasting importance of blues music and its literary representation is its lasting influence on black American readers. In a review of Kiese Laymon’s *Heavy: An American Memoir* (2018), Zandria Robinson describes Laymon as the “chief blues scribe of our time” because his new book “remembers for [her], and for us all, with the exquisite black southern precision of a post-soul blues.” Here Robinson argues that Laymon’s writing captures the nuance of black southern experience in the ways it resists flattening black Mississippi experience and disrupts imposed historical narratives. Laymon fingers the jagged grain of being a black boy in Mississippi and expresses the experience lyrically. Laymon, too, is interested in the cultural value of blues music and how it relates to his writing. He writes, in his author’s note for his first collection of essays, *How to Slowly Kill Yourself and Others in America* (2013), how “most American literature, unlike lots of American blues, soul, and hip-hop, did not create an echo” for African American readers. He continues, “[m]ost American literary classics were not courageous, imaginative or honest enough to imagine our people, our experiences as part of its audience” (12). Laymon’s invocation of the “echo,” a sonic wake, created by black musical expression helps to locate black listeners in a continuum of black experience. Conversely, classic (white by default) American literature offers African American readers no wake in which to locate themselves.

⁴⁵ In her most recent novel, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2018), Ward’s novel is literally haunted by the ghost of a young boy killed in Parchman Prison, the infamous Mississippi prison work farm that maintains a plantation structure to this day.

Laymon writes for a black audience while writing into a black literary tradition. His addition to the black literary canon is dependent on previous generations of black authors who have created this “echo” and uncovered the “act of being human” in and for black America. Some of the African American authors who have created such echoes, for Laymon, are Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, and Octavia Butler. Butler, especially, taught him, as he puts it, to “will myself beyond spectacle and into generative imagination that needed to look forward and back” (12). Laymon recognizes how important the past is to understand the present and to move into the future. He blends that temporal mixture with the power he sees in black music, which reminds him that “I was not alone, that American genius was real,” and “that American sound could be this magical communal site of resistance and activism” (13). Laymon purposefully and without explanation identifies black literature and music as American, adding nuance—blackness—to a typically white-by-default national signifier. He incorporates the blues as “ethos” into his writing to champion the importance of community, black excellence and ingenuity, and being a better human—uncovering the damages wrought on black Americans by systemic racism but also the damage they have done to one another (13).

Laymon’s first novel *Long Division* (2013) novel is concerned with the lessons of the past and how remembering black experience into the present is integral to survival. The novel has three distinct timelines: 1964, segregated pre-Civil Rights Mississippi; 1985, post-civil rights but pre-Katrina; and 2013, post-civil rights, post-Katrina. Laymon’s narrative presents a long-scarred Mississippi where forgotten black communities fight to survive the things that oppress them, from the terror of Jim Crow to the lack of sufficient US Federal aid after hurricane Katrina. As Ward’s novel illustrates, black Mississippians were forgotten and left to fend for themselves after Katrina—reminding us of Kanye West’s infamous outcry on CNN that “George

Bush doesn't care about black people." Laymon's novel shows how this disregard for black lives is a long-standing American problem. Despite how vulnerable the black citizens in *Long Division* seem to be, the novel does not fall into despair. Instead it follows the tenets of the blues aesthetic by dispelling the underlying sadness with humor and *joie de vivre* to produce a story about the healing powers of love and the strength of black communities.

In a conversation I had with Laymon for *New Ohio Review*, I asked him about his relationship with the blues and how he uses the form in his work. Laymon responded that he "use to have all these conversations about what a postmodern blues novel would look like in the twenty-first century." And that he tried to "answer that question with *Long Division*." "For me," he continues:

the blues is the perpetual reckoning with what should be agony, but finding ways of making that reckoning pleasurable. The agony and the pleasure exist right up next to one another. The question is how do we most effectively hold ourselves together through the pain, through the suffering, and through the agony? My history in this country teaches me that you have to do it through art. That doesn't mean the art that gets sold. But the art of talking. The art of listening. The art of making sounds. The art of rhythmically manipulating repetition, which I think was really at the core of the blues. (qtd. in Ferguson)

In Laymon's understanding of the blues as part of a black creative aesthetic are echoes of Ellison's famous definition. The similarities that arise time and time again are the ways in which black Americans are asked to encounter—or as Laymon puts it, recon with—their history as denizens of this country, a history that took centuries to recognize black citizenship and a present that struggles (not) to see the humanity of black lives. For Laymon, the blues are black artistic

expression of the ways in which black Americans articulate the pleasure found in and despite living the precarious realities of black life.

Long Division is set mostly in the fictional Mississippi town of Melahatchie.⁴⁶ The novel consists of two interwoven narratives about two young black, chubby, teenage boys, both named City. City from 2013 “treats his wave brush like a rosary” and loves the power of words and sentences (McCall). He has recently been sent to stay with his grandma because of his outburst at the “Fifth Annual Can You Use That Word in a Sentence National Competition,” created because “states in the Deep South, Midwest, and Southwest complained that the Scripps Spelling Bee was geographically biased” (7). City from 1985 wants to try his best “game” on his crush, Shalaya Crump. The two talk about the limits of love and the terrifying ambiguity of the future. To prove his love for Shalaya, City time travels with her forward to 2013 and backward to 1963, where they experience Mississippi after Katrina and the election of President Obama *and* a segregated Mississippi inhabited by the Ku Klux Klan.

At the center of both of the City narratives—both contained in novels also called *Long Division*—is the “honor student and wannabe rapper,” Baize Shepard, who is missing in 2013 because she traveled with City from 1985 (29). Baize is the daughter of 1985 City and Shalaya, both of whom, we eventually find out, die in Hurricane Katrina. However, because of their time traveling, City and Shalaya don’t end up together and Baize disappears alone in the dark. Laymon’s novel is deeply invested in how we remember and respect the past and what that means for our futures. A key to this novel lies in a true/false test 2013 City takes where he considers the statements “Only those who can read, write, and love can move back or forward

⁴⁶ There is, however, a Pelahatchie in Central, MS. While I won’t claim that these towns are the same, it is important to note how close the real Pelahatchie is to Meridian and Philadelphia, MS. Within proximity of where James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner, three civil rights activists trying to help register black citizens, were murdered by white supremacists.

through time” and “Past, present, and future exist within you and you change them by changing the way you live your life” (15, 16). We are never given the answers directly to this quiz, but the novel consistently shows how deeply connected these characters are to their past and how their choices and behaviors affect not just their futures but those they love.

Long Division’s invocation of the blues and blues music departs from the representations provided by Hannaham and Ward. Laymon’s novel does not tell the story of a blues musician or offer representations of blues performances, nor does it necessarily use blues music as a named soundtrack throughout the narrative. Instead, *Long Division* is invested in the history of Mississippi and the lives of its black citizens as they love and despair in a state built against them. The Mississippi found in *Long Division* is represented through black vernacular experience and falls more in line with the blues matrix outlined by Houston Baker in his *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*. Baker provides markers of the blues’ presence through geographical space, black vernacular voice, and economic disparity. Laymon’s novel too is invested in the politics of space, the lasting power of history, and the power of black self-expression.

The characters in Laymon’s novel are the inheritors of a legacy of black history and of self-expression that they struggle to integrate into their daily lives. For example, when 1985 City steals Baize’s laptop, one that she bought with the “last of that Katrina money” (67), he pulls up the file “Storm Rhyme #4.” Her rap’s title shows that Baize has struggled to articulate her complex feelings about Hurricane Katrina. This, the fourth iteration of her song, considers how “every day’s a gray haze,” pleads that she wants someone to “Come take the / pain outta Baize,” and states pridefully that she was “born right here in the South / where Ma and Daddy, they went swimming, / tryin to find a way out.” Noting her depressive state, Baize marks a complicated

relationship between a sense of home in the South, escape, longing for her family, death, and those who “really fucked us!” (74). Baize, by worrying the loss of her parents and her turbulent connection to the South, creates her own kind of blues song, where the form is different, but the sentiment strikes a familiar chord. Not unlike how Kendrick Lamar raps about his experience in urban Los Angeles, Baize raps about the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina in Melahatchie, MS, updating the blues songs written about the 1927 Mississippi flood.⁴⁷ Baize’s rap resonates with echoes of the blues, as she uses a black musical form to express her position as a young black woman, heartsick with loss, at the mercy of socio-economic precarity, and yet she calls out the systems that put her into this position, insisting that “you really fucked us!”

Laymon’s *Long Division* uses 2013 City to articulate how blues, as an emotional state, is ubiquitous across his community. City describes a moment of empathy in which, through a type of synaesthesia, he equates levels of sadness with colors. He says the “sad” he feels was “all just layers and layers of the thickest blues you’d ever seen in your life.” He then starts to think about his family and friends and “just felt so much bluer than ever.” City comes to recognize that each of “those folks tried to mask their different blues, but after praying, smoking, rapping, thinking, drinking, and running, there just seemed to be nothing else left but blue rooms with people who were really even lonelier and bluer than . . . the bluest girl I ever knew” (195). The blue people City recognizes are in their own rooms—isolated, separate. He marks a breakdown in communication and community. Despite City’s emotional maturation, he is left frustrated because he doesn’t know what to do with his feelings or how to help those folks trying to mask their different blues. He says that when he felt blue, he would pick his scabs, masturbate, think

⁴⁷ The ethnomusicologist David Evans outlines a series of these blues songs in his essay, “High Water Everywhere: Blues and Gospel Commentary on the 1927 Mississippi River Flood” found in Robert Springer and Randall Cherry’s *Nobody Knows Where the Blues Come From: Lyrics and History* (2006).

about pranks at school, be an internet troll, be “extremely ratchet on Facebook,” or eat so much “off-brand Lucky Charms” he would get “severe bubble guts” (195). City lacks a means to express his blues and is just starting to figure out that he might be able to develop a community that can show him how. Laymon’s novel suggests, however, that confronting the history and the experiences that engender those blues feelings is a necessary start to articulating a method of healing.

Laymon’s novel, especially its foregrounding of blues feelings in the absence of blues music, marks a return to writing blues as a means of chronicling folk worlds, committing contemporary black experience to written record. At the very end of his acknowledgements section, Laymon writes a one-word sentence: “Blues” (270), a strikingly ambiguous end to a novel so completely indebted to black history, experience, religion, and community. Laymon’s final words demands that readers of his novel recognize the ways in which he fingers the “jagged grain” of the “painful details and episodes of a brutal experience.” Laymon’s novel represents contemporary black southern experience as a means of unearthing and sharing the so-often elided voices of black Mississippians. Ending the novel on a note of self-aware instruction, *Long Division* tells its readers that “all we needed to know about how to survive, how to live, and how to love in Mississippi was in our hands. The sentences had always been there” (267). The novel asks its readers to know their history and to see how it informs their present because the blood, sweat, tears, and lives lost to get even this far are not just reminders of a black past but are important lessons that inform daily life and that drastically affect the future. Laymon wants his readers to take these lessons and turn to the page, to make sentences, to talk and write, to actively reckon with the past and present. Laymon invests less in what the musical elements of the blue achieve and more into what the lyrics come to represent for black Americans.

Representations of blues music and aesthetics in African American literature provide a means of tracing a developing history of black American experience. Blues is not only a historical marker of the *de jure* tyranny of Jim Crow, but it is also an artistic expressive form, a vernacular form, for a precarious black underclass. What blues offers the contemporary period is a means of narrativizing the way in which recurring social and civil abuses have affected the individual by offering depictions of their community. To understand the experience of young black children whose parents have been murdered or are addicted to drugs, James Hannaham provides Eddie's story and reminds readers that this country will figuratively and literally dismember black bodies and families. Ward depicts the destruction of Hurricane Katrina and the precarity of teenage pregnancy in an impoverished and often forgotten area of the country, reminding many black southerners that they are on their own when disaster strikes. Laymon's blues is to reckon with the ways in which black experience in Mississippi continues to develop scenes of subjection that feel simultaneously new and familiar. At the heart of these blues narratives is an unearthing of the realities of black southern experience that provides a narrativized record of those who stayed in the South during the great migration and the experience of their children and their children's children. In the case of these three novels, the South is a productive space of cultural and social development—it does have something to say—while remaining victim to its ongoing history of subjection.

If the blues are a means of narrativizing black American history and cultural memory as a means of understanding the present, then how do literary representations of blues music attest to the particular experiences of non-African Americans? What do the blues look and sound like on Indigenous reservations or in African Canada? Those questions are the subject of what follows.

Chapter 3 – Blues, Sovereignty, and Indigeneity

Unless the indigenous are dancing powwow all decked out in flash and beauty
We just don't exist. We've been dispersed to an outlaw cowboy tale.
What were they thinking with all those guns and those handcuffs
In a size for babies?
They just don't choose to remember.
We're here.

“Everybody has a Heartache: A Blues,” Joy Harjo (2014)

I get stopped every time I try to cross that border, but stories go wherever they
please.

The Inconvenient Indian, Thomas King (2012)

You take these facts of life and make them into songs.

I am the Blues: The Willie Dixon Story, Willie Dixon (1989)

In the first half of this dissertation, the blues has been read as historically linked to black folk cultures, as the locus of black cultural memory that reinterprets black experiences under segregation, and as a means to connect that cultural memory to the present, creating a lineage of black blues literary use. The turn, for this chapter, is to interrogate how blues music, musicians, and aesthetics are incorporated in the writing of Indigenous authors and to what effect. The blues, however, offer a particularly tense political dynamic when it comes to cultural appropriation. There is appropriation on a systemic scale where record companies privilege white artists and under-represent/-support black artists. And, on the level of individual performances, there are whites and other non-African Americans who tenderly appreciate the art

and aesthetics of the form because it provides a potent expression of the pains and joys of life. Neither of these assertions is particularly revelatory; both Eric Lott, in his *Love and Theft*, and Perry Hall, in his chapter “African-American Music: Dynamics of Appropriation and Innovation,” articulate the nuances of black cultural appropriation by white musicians, writers, and consumers and the profit-taking systems in which they function. Hall explains that appropriation is a “complex ‘love-hate’ relationship” where “white America seems to love the melody and rhythm of Black folks’ souls while rejecting their despised Black faces” (31). Both Lott and Hall articulate white folks’ love and appreciation of black cultural production that creates a “racial fantasy” of how Black folks are perceived in the national (later global) social imagination (Lott 4). The impact, however, of white cultural appropriation lies in how it removes the humanity from Black vernacular forms and commodifies those forms materially and socially. But I want to trouble the waters here: what if recognized minorities, rather than whites, are doing the appropriating? If the white hierarchal power structure is moved to the periphery, how does this type of multi-ethnic love and theft play out?

The draw of blues music is a mixture of its global popularity with its ability to call into question the realities of daily existence—good or bad—of a group of people often subjected and forgotten. In Jerry Wasserman’s discussion of blues and Canadian drama he helpfully articulates the attraction to the musical form: “For Canadians, obsessively-compulsively ambivalent about everything American, the blues provided an opportunity to have it both ways: to reject America’s philistinism and imperialism and, at the same time, to tap into its cultural potency” (n.p.). It is not a stretch to replace “Canadians” with any nation that wishes to keep some distance from the US’s history of imperial domination. Black Studies scholar Clyde Woods, says it another way: The blues “offers a multiethnic working-class vision of a flawed United States haunted by its

own practices of ethnic oppression and enforced poverty.” They also produce “an unapologetic celebration of life, resistance, spiritual affirmation, community, social and humanity, and the highest levels . . . of African American culture and philosophy” (21). The blues provides an alternative vision of the United States that calls into question the nation’s treatment of its most vulnerable citizens while simultaneously expressing resilience despite that subjection.

Blues is an idiom of resistance that, as literary critic Tony Bolden explains, “demonstrates an identification with the repressed colonized culture by its revision of vernacular forms” (37). If “one of the most devastating effects of colonization is the destruction of a people’s history and culture,” then, to counter the historic and present damages of colonial rule, a “poetics based on music can be an effective tool in assisting readers to kill the colonizer within their own psyches” (38). In the context of Indigenous experiences, John Troutman, in his *Indian Blues: American Indians and the Politics of Music, 1879-1934* (2009), explains that the “practice of music” can “reinforce . . . tribal identities.” “Musical performances,” he continues, “provided access to public forums . . . for questioning and challenging the propriety of the federal government to assume control over Native lands, resources, and education. Music *mattered*, as a means not simply of resistance but of active involvement in the shaping and implementation of federal policy initiatives” (5, emphasis in original). The politics of indigenous music and the blues are aligned in such way that a cross-cultural adaptation has the potential to articulate indigenous experience under colonial rule in new and dynamic fashion.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Two great examples of this cultural blending are the 1970s rock band Redbone, and the contemporary hip-hop/electronix sensation, A Tribe Called Red. Their music offers a “unique way to negotiate, challenge, or fortify the lines of citizenship” (Troutman 5), be it through appropriating rock ’n roll as a powwow song or using the pounding drums of a powwow as the foundation to a rap song with Yasiin Bey (formerly known as Mos Def). Redbone’s 1974 performance of “Come and Get Your Love” on Burt Sugarman’s *Midnight Special* (1973-81) is a potent display of Indianness on a mainstream program. Tony Bellamy comes out doing a fancy dance complete with bustle while the band sings a powwow styled intro. The rest of the band then transitions into their hit song, which maintains familiar sounds of “indianness.” The band is unapologetically made up of a pan-tribal mixture that produces a series of anthems for Indigenous and national experience—“We Were All Wounded at Wounded Knee”

The blues texts explored in this chapter are solely written by Indigenous authors. These are their poems, plays, and novels that use the blues in myriad ways to articulate Indigenous experiences of isolation, precarity, and community in Canada and the United States. Although Eden Robinson (Haisla/Heiltsuk), Louise Erdrich (Anishinaabe), Thomas King (Cherokee), Leslie Marmon Silko (Laguna Pueblo) and many other Indigenous authors hold to these same tenets, the use of the blues by Sherman Alexie (Spokane/Coeur D'Alene), Joy Harjo (Creek), Richard Wagamese (Anishinaabe), and Drew Hayden Taylor (Anishinaabe) present a sub-category in Indigenous literature. Through representations of blues music, musicians, and forms of self-annunciation rooted in the blues lyric tradition, these authors co-opt a popular form—one that resists white power structures and supremacy—and adapt Euro-North American cultural codes to privilege their culture and traditions.

Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues* (1995) begins with Robert Johnson walking into the town of Wellpinit, on the Spokane Reservation. Alexie's novel is deeply invested in the political potency of the blues. The often humorous narrative offers us characters who, with the help of the music, learn to express their woes—violence, sexual assault, alcoholism, or federal apathy—and their successes—romantic and platonic relationships, self-reliance in the face of white industry, or escape. Richard Wagamese's *Keeper 'n Me* (1994) uses blues music to reacquaint Garnet Raven with the music of the soul and the rhythms of the natural world. Focusing on the rambler trope and a search for a way back home, Wagamese uses the blues as a marker of change and

is another one of their hit songs. In the case of A Tribe Called Red, they mix electronic beats with First Nations' drumming and singing, and, at times, hip hop MCs rapping on top. Their music functions politically. They make the deliberate choice to provide positive representations of First Nations' contributions to pop culture. In a documentary video on their website, "The Manawan Session," DJ Bear Witness explains, "we need this music within popular culture that defines us, because it is time now for us to come out and finally have the opportunity to depict ourselves, to show ourselves in a way that we want to be seen. There's this history of Indigenous people being portrayed always by the outsider, always looking in. We are here to represent Indigenous people, you know, in the realest way that we've never had a chance to show ourselves before."

cultural difference to express how he, and his community, have been damaged by settler colonialism. In Drew Hayden Taylor's blues plays—*The Bootlegger Blues* (1991), *The Baby Blues* (1999), *The Buz 'Gem Blues* (2002), *The Berlin Blues* (2007), and *Cerulean Blue* (2015)—he uses the blues structurally and formally instead of in direct homage to the genre's African American roots. His use of the word “blues” in his plays' titles signals his audience to listen for his riff on the genre.

The study of Indigenous blues texts allows for two important critical developments: First, a multi-ethnic solidarity is imagined between black and Indigenous people, where the struggles of black liberation and settler colonialism meet at a political crossroads. Indigenous blues texts leverage the popularity of blues music to amplify the experiences of both black and native peoples, which are often minimized or erased. Second, the addition of Indigenous narratives of precarity and subjection that interrogate how the history of settler colonialism and its afterlives continues to haunt Indigenous people expands the boundaries of the literary blues.

Everybody has a Heartache

While waiting on a delayed flight between Chicago, Illinois and Newport, Virginia, the celebrated poet and musician, Joy Harjo, looked around at her fellow passengers and wrote “Everybody Has a Heartache: A Blues” (2014). The poem is set in a hellish airport limbo where “all flights / Are delayed forever.” The narrator relates the individual heartaches of her fellow would-be passengers and ends each stanza with the refrain “[e]verybody has a heartache.” Then the narrator turns her focus on her cultural community and, finally, on herself. She asserts that Indigenous people are still, in fact, “here” in the US (and the Americas as a whole) despite how

they have been “dispersed to an Outlaw cowboy tale.” The layers of her heartache move from her cultural erasure (“we”) to a personal (“I”) grappling with the effects of settler colonialism:

I don’t know exactly where I’m going; I only know where I’ve been,
I want to tell the man who sifted through the wreck to find us here
In the blues shack of disappeared history—
I feel the weight of his heart against my cheek.
His hand is on my back pulling me to him in the dark, to a place
No soldiers can reach.
I hear the whoop-cries of warriors calling fire for a stand
Against the brutality of forgetfulness—

The poem ends with an evolution on the refrain to create a larger, more inclusive community: “*We* have a heartache” (emphasis added).

This poem’s structure is predicated on gathering the personal and cultural trauma of the mis-represented, mis-remembered, and effectively forgotten North American Indigenous peoples. Harjo posits that, if Indigenous people aren’t performing their indigeneity within the narrow confines outlined by popular representations of Indians—be that in film, music, art, literature, advertisements, or “dancing powwow all decked out in flash and beauty”—then Indigenous people are effectively non-existent within the (inter)national imaginary. American Indians have been pushed so far to the periphery that only performing “Indianness” can garner any attention. Harjo asks that her cultural heartache be heard along with the heartaches of the various subjects in the poem. She creates a community of hurt peoples and empathizes with their loss. And, her poem ends on a note of potential: “We will all find our way.”⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Steven C. Tracy, in his introduction to *Going to Cincinnati: A History of the Blues in the Queen City* (1993), writes, “If being black, poor, beaten, lynched, and forced both literally and figuratively into the bottom is part of

Harjo's poem deliberately invites investigation as a blues through her subtitle, "A Blues." Taking her title seriously, her poem is a blues because of how it establishes a sense of community through cultural history and empathy, how she represents marginalized people, and how she ends on a note of hope and empathy. Harjo's blues recognizes African American experience but privileges Indigenous experience under the contemporary effects of settler colonialism, which leads us to a quandary. The biggest hurdle to overcome in establishing an Indigenous blues tradition is accounting for the seemingly inextricable relationship between the blues and African American culture.

In the case of Harjo's poem, and the majority of texts covered in this chapter, the blues are used to develop Indigenous experience while recognizing the form as an integral part of black history and culture. Harjo, a talented musician and conscientious writer, is clearly aware of the contributions African Americans have made to all forms of popular music. In her music, Harjo "weaves together distinct sounds to create a soundscape that is diverse and rich" (Rios 110). Much in the same way, in "Everyone has a Heartache," Harjo creates a richly evocative and diverse group of passengers, including one with connections to Africa:

The man with his head bobbing to music no one else can hear has that satisfied
Feel — a full belly of sweet and a wife who sings heartache to sleep.
In his luggage (that will be lost and never found) is a musty dream of flying
Solo to Africa, with a stop on the return to let go the stories too difficult to
Carry home. He'll take off his shoes to walk in a warm, tropical sea.

what was or is always on the horizon for African-Americans, the blues can often see the sun that will shine in the back door someday" (xxviii-xxix). Tracy's point is that despite the pressures and struggles of daily black existence, the blues are there to celebrate the victories of life—from sexual conquests and personal successes to surviving another day on this earth. The blues are just as much about carrying on and seeing the ironies in life as they are about expressing the bad-hand that's been dealt.

He'll sing to the ancestors:

Take me home to mama. No one cooks like her.

But all the mamas worked to the bone gone too young.

Broken by The Man.

Everybody has a heartache —

This stanza develops a diasporic connection to Africa as well as a cultural connection to the blues. It is full of sonic cues—"hear," "solo," "sing," and "music"—even as it gestures at moments of silence. And, despite the fact that "[N]o one else can hear" the song this man bobs his head to, the poet recognizes the song he would sing if he ever makes it to Africa. His song yearns for home, for his mother, and for connections to a history that has been ruptured by slavery. The heartache here is that he is caught in this airport limbo and will never know his ancestral homeland.

The man with his head bobbing is the only figure who hears music throughout the majority of the poem. It isn't until the narrator turns to her cultural heartache that attention is drawn to how quiet the poem has been: "This silence in the noise of the terminal is a mountain of bison skulls." The elephant in the room, so to speak, is the haunting specter of Indigenous ways of being. The narrator, however, is not about to let this silence remain: "In the terminal of stopped time I went unsteady to the beat." She tentatively approaches this new rhythm as a means to express her heartache. It is as if she can hear the man's music and offers it to the "hungry spirit who is drunk with words and songs" and who only "eats fire, poetry, and rain; it only wants love." This spirit too cannot be satisfied. So, she tells her story to feed the spirit. She tells how she knows her past, is unsure of her future; she too can be found in the "blues shack of

disappeared history.” The “wreck” of the plane, which she and her fellow would-be passengers never take, hosts the juke joint where she slow drags with a man surrounded by the “whoop cries” of her people and hides safely away from colonial forces. The arresting qualities of her poem lie in her final note of persistence and created community. Her inability to be satisfied in a world that deems her Indigeneity as either an antiquity or already forgotten brings her closer to those other heartsick folks of the terminal. Harjo’s blues poem reminds her audience that her culture and people are alive and makes a community with the other passengers caught in this airport limbo (perhaps a loose metaphor for the US and its inability to progress forward).

My reading of Harjo’s poem seeks to uncover an ethnic solidarity based on cultural appreciation and empathetic community and to show the development of Indigenous culture and identity built on an engagement with the blues aesthetic. Harjo positions the epistemological ruptures of black diasporic experience at a crossroads with the cultural and physical destruction of Indigenous ways of life. Her airport terminal becomes a space where multiple types of people are asked to interact and share space. Houston Baker, in his reading of African America literature before 1965 and his articulation of a blues inflected methodology, argued that the train station was a “junction” that “persuasively and playfully refigures expressive geographies in the United States” (*Blues* 11). Harjo expands Baker’s junction to the airport terminal where global traffic is quotidian, and everybody has a heartache. Harjo’s air terminal offers greater access to a blues form for those hiding in the blues shack of forgotten history. The airport terminal is more in line with Tony Bolden’s “blues network,” which “functions as a junction, a (super)conductor, intersecting classes, cultures, and continents” (43). Harjo’s blues become more inclusive and expansive, with a global potential, in order to articulate a plethora of cultural and social erasures.

Harjo's blues breaks the silence of forgetfulness and claims "we are here," effectively deconstructing the colonial project of Manifest Destiny, the Indian Act, the Dawes Act, etc, but also expanding the parameters of inter-ethnic relationships. The politics of Harjo's poem are reflected in Gabriela Raquel Rios's discussion of her music. Rios argues that as Harjo "boldly uses and lays claim to sonic structures that are typically viewed as non-Native, but that are born here in the lands currently being called 'the Americas,' she sends a message about sovereignty and the connection of sounds to land bases and to people who have shared experiences on those land bases" (121). Rios's claim is that Harjo, as an Indigenous person, has sovereign rights to the land and therefore to all the cultural production developed therein. The politics of such a claim—that all culture in the Americas is a product of Indigenous peoples' land—produce a type of cultural reparations, but it does not speak to the fluidity of cultural interaction and evolution. In fact, Rios's claim is short-sighted in how it understands the experiences of other minorities in the Americas who have struggled to develop rich cultures despite the histories of slavery and colonialism. The poetic voice in "Everybody Has a Heartache: A Blues," however, comes to terms with the reality that "there's no way back to where we've been," recognizing that the possibility of sovereign land ownership will not erase the history that already exists. Harjo's airport terminal doesn't lay specific claim to the space but, instead, provides an intersectional space where the multiple personal heartaches of the other passengers are met with empathy.

There remains, however, another complication in establishing an Indigenous blues tradition. At the risk of stating the obvious, Black and Indigenous culture and experience are very different. We can make arguments for the similarities: both groups of people are oppressed, both have been affected by colonialism, and both are consistently disenfranchised by regional,

national, and global institutions. However, there is a very real distinction between, what Jared Sexton outlines, “racial slavery and settler colonialism” (583).

To begin, we are better off if we understand the fundamental differences between racial slavery and settler colonialism. Settler colonialism seeks to usurp “the claim to Indigenous residence. ‘You, go away’ can mean the removal of the native population, its destruction through direct killing or the imposition of unlivable conditions, its assimilation into the settler colonial society, or some combination of each” (Sexton 585). The devastation wrought by settler colonialism lies in its desire to eradicate the physical presence of the original landholders, be it through genocide, assimilation, or ghettoization. Perhaps most insidiously, the settler’s project dehumanizes the native population as “savage” or “primitive,” allowing the settler to rationalize the native’s inability to command the wealth of the land. The settlers “know what’s best” and forcibly remove the “responsibility” of land control from the native population.

Racial slavery is a direct product of the capitalistic impulse of colonialism: enforced labor that benefits the proprietors while making property out of human beings, rationalized through a constructed racial hierarchy. Racial slavery in the Americas was devastating to the diasporic black population for myriad reasons—cultural erasure, abduction, rape, enforced labor, torture, and the destruction of familial ties, to name a few. Jared Sexton argues that much of the devastation done by racial slavery in the US is due to how it created a landless people and effectively erased black indigeneity:

The loss of indigeneity for black peoples can be acknowledged only abstractly and its recovery is lost to history, and so something else must (and can) become central to political mobilization. Not only the dialectics of loss and recovery but rather the loss of the dialectics of loss and recovery as such, a politics with no (final) recourse to

foundations of any sort, a politics forged from critical resources immanent to the situation, resources from anywhere and anyone, which is to say from nowhere and no one *in particular*. (Sexton 589, emphasis in original)

Black people in America are left to create their own culture in, and connection to, a foreign land—land that they have been systematically denied post-emancipation, through false promises of reparations, redlining, and ghettoization.

Much of the work done in African American studies has been in an effort to recuperate the loss of African indigenous cultural specificity. Melville Herskovits's *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1941), Leroi Jones's *Blues People* (1963), and Henry Louis Gates's *The Signifying Monkey* (1988) find ways back to Africa through forms of storytelling, modes of behavior, and social interaction. What Jones deems "Africanisms" are "examples of pure African traditions that have survived three hundred years of slavery and four hundred years of removal from their source" (13). The internal struggle within the concept of Africanisms lies in the loss of cultural specificity and the pains to recuperate it, which creates a pan-African tradition that informs modes of culture but also highlights the gaps that will always be lost.⁵⁰ A disconnect develops between theoretical and historical recuperation and daily existence.⁵¹

⁵⁰ In her *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2007), Saidiya Hartman tries to rebuild a familial and genealogical connection to Africa by turning to the continent and the archive. What she finds is a painful gap between her family in the United States and Ghana. The slave trade made strangers of the enslaved and erased the cultural and social connections that could connect black diasporic life back to an African ancestry.

⁵¹ A particularly illustrative literary example of this gap between historical recuperation and daily life can be found in Alice Walker's widely anthologized short story "Everyday Use" (1973). When Dee comes home (now going by the name of Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo), she accuses her mother and sister, Maggie, of not understanding their "heritage" (2639). Dee (Wangero) wants to take some handmade quilts and hang them on the wall. These quilts were promised to her sister, but, Dee (Wangero) explains that "Maggie can't appreciate these quilts . . . She'd probably be backward enough to put them to everyday use" (2638). The disconnect that develops is between the historicizing linksconnections to a pan-African cultural memory (the quilts) and their actual functional value on a day to day basis. All of which puts pressure on which part of African American to focus on. And leads us back to DuBois's double consciousness: Do we focus on the *African* to make cultural connections back to the continent or do we focus on the *American* to understand black daily struggle, survival, and success? Or somewhere in between where a dialectic develops between Africanisms and black American life?

While it becomes clear that settler colonialism and racial slavery are distinct monsters of their own, they are coextensive colonial institutions that devastate rich cultures as part of a larger (white) American (hemispheric) project. Justin Leroy reminds us that the “projects of slavery and colonialism have never been concerned with which came first, or which is more elemental—they have in fact thrived on the slippages and ambiguities of their relationship to one another” (n.p.). Both Leroy and Sexton’s work develop a disciplinary crossroads where Native and African American studies stand at an impasse. The theoretical focus concerning sovereignty in Native Studies positions black figures as unwitting settlers, which doesn’t appropriately articulate the struggles of black experience during slavery and into emancipation. African American Studies, with its current focus on mass incarceration, police killings, and developing a praxis to deconstruct systemic racism in America, often overlooks the Indigenous population in its political and academic pursuits, which contributes to a racial hierarchy and to the forgotten Indian trope across multi-ethnic lines. While these two intellectual cohorts work amongst themselves and despite one another, colonial powers reap the benefits of disciplinary, decolonial discord.

Leroy focuses on the limited perspectives of the theoretical positions of Native and African American Studies where colonialism and racial slavery are “incompatible” and unable to “fully account for the historical messiness of black and indigenous encounters with one another and with the US state.” Consider for a moment the popularity and influence of Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993). Although Gilroy admits his exclusive focus on black Atlantic experience early in the text, the strict focus on transatlantic black experience and culture offers only a portion of the history across and along the Atlantic basin—not necessarily a failing of Gilroy’s but a limitation of what a single study is capable of

doing with such a specific focus.⁵² In order to address one of the gaps in Gilroy's narrative, Jace Weaver responds with his own historical account, *The Red Atlantic: American Indigenes and the Making of the Modern World, 1000-1927* (2014). Weaver admits that his text is corrective because Gilroy may have "successfully secured for Africans a place of inclusion in the study of the Atlantic world" but "he did little regarding other potential groups, in particular Western Hemisphere indigenes" (7). While this is not necessarily Gilroy's responsibility as a black sociologist who focuses on black diasporic culture, his text does promote a black-first Atlantic experience simply through the absence of other minority experiences. Weaver's and Gilroy's texts work alongside one another, not with one another, and at such a pitch that one tries to subordinate the other—the same impasse that Leroy brings to our attention. Another example of black and Indigenous intellectual and political hierarchical discord can be found in the rise of the Black Power Movement in the late 1960s reaching its peak in the 1970s and the coextensive rise of the American Indian Movement (AIM). Even today the AIM website claims historical supremacy: "the movement," it states "existed for 500 years without a name," which suggests a centuries-long struggle based on the devastation of settler colonialism. Once again, a theoretical supremacy is insisted upon (Waterman, Wittstock, and Salinas). However, on a practical level, these exceptionalist claims for the supremacy of the decolonizing projects of American Indians or African Americans do nothing to hinder white institutions from doing lasting damage and enacting racial and socio-economic terror.⁵³

⁵² Gilroy defends his narrow focus on black cultural connections across the Atlantic and their "adoptive, parental cultures" even though he fully acknowledges that "the reflexive cultures and consciousness of the European settlers and those of the Africans they enslaved, the 'Indians' they slaughtered, and the Asians they indentured were not, even in situations of the most extreme brutality, even in situations of the most extreme brutality, sealed off hermetically from each other, then so be it" (2).

⁵³ Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall's *Agents of Repression: The FBI's Secret Wars Against the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement* (1988) outlines the way the FBI and its counterintelligence program (COINTELPRO) actively suppressed and neutralized these nationalist and sovereigntist groups.

While Leroy works out the theoretical implications of the origins and persistence of this disciplinary impasse, he also offers a particularly insightful question: “What might emerge if scholars suspended—even momentarily—such [exceptionalist] claims in order to consider the impasse of settlement and slavery using historical methods?” (n.p.). Or, even more simply, what might emerge if scholars pursued intellectual and political intersections across ethnic lines? Moving away from arguing whose theoretical model is best suited to attesting to and reducing the damages produced by white European colonialism (the trap that Sexton falls into) offers the potential for multi-ethnic solidarity in the face of oppressive white forces, be they socio-economic ones like class distinctions and poverty across racial lines or historic ones that position Indigenous people as obsolete and Black people as not fully human. Across ethnic lines, there are voices that express empathy and leverage their platforms to amplify a coalitional solidarity to the pitch where they are heard and valued despite white mediation.⁵⁴

Perhaps the most beneficial aspect of developing a multi-ethnic solidarity is the power found in recognition and cultural empathy that binds instead of divides. A contemporary grassroots example of an African American and Indigenous coalition can be found in the September 3rd, 2016 statement made by the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, entitled “Black Lives Matter Stands in Solidarity with Water Protectors at Standing Rock.” BLM described the situation in Standing Rock, explained that members of their movement have gone to North Dakota to support Indigenous protestors, and provided ways to help the No Dakota

⁵⁴ I realize there is an inherent irony in this claim due to the fact that I am myself white and attempting to mediate this already tense academic conversation between Native and African American studies. The point of my claim is to think about how multi-ethnic literature reaches across, and works with, other minority cultures to deconstruct white social constraints or exist without any consideration of whiteness, and how that can be done through a blues idiom. The hope is that this project and others like it help to promote the investigation of multi-ethnic solidarity across the humanities.

Access Pipeline (NODAPL) movement. Staying on message for the sovereignty of life, BLM promoted a multi-ethnic solidarity in the face of colonial America:

Black Lives Matter stands with Standing Rock. As there are many diverse manifestations of Blackness, and Black people are also displaced Indigenous peoples, we are clear that there is no Black liberation without Indigenous sovereignty. Environmental racism is not limited to pipelines on Indigenous land, because we know that the chemicals used for fracking and the materials used to build pipelines are also used in water containment and sanitation plants in Black communities like Flint, Michigan . . . Our liberation is only realized when all people are free, free to access clean water, free from institutional racism, free to live whole and healthy lives not subjected to state-sanctioned violence. America has committed and is committing genocide against Native American peoples and Black people. We are in an ongoing struggle for our lives and this struggle is shaped by the shared history between Indigenous peoples and Black people in America, connecting that stolen land and stolen labor from Black and brown people who built this country.

With the election of Donald J. Trump as US President, the Dakota Access Pipeline was approved, and the sovereignty of Indigenous people was, again, denied. However, the potency of the BLM's act of solidarity lies in the acceptance of historical and cultural differences *and* the acknowledgment that decolonization can only come into being when all oppressed groups band together.

In a similar way to the BLM's statement, Harjo's poem recognizes the colonialist damages done upon black and Indigenous peoples. Her display of solidarity, however, complicates the blues. If the blues are "always becoming, shaping, transforming, displacing the

peculiar experiences of *Africans* in the New World” (Baker 5, my emphasis), then Harjo’s use of the form pushes the boundaries Baker sets out. Harjo interprets the blues to produce a platform that amplifies Indigenous experience. She highlights the cultural erasure that isolates Indigenous people in North America, but she also acknowledges the absences in African genealogical narratives. Her blues poetry, then, recognizes the experiences of Africans in the New World alongside those of Native Americans. Harjo’s blues poem is an evolutionary extension of the black cultural form where she remembers the blues’ black forebearers but incorporates her experience to develop an ethnic solidarity through racial, cultural, and historical understanding.

My fear in linking Harjo to this rich tradition is that it will lead to the divorce of black labor from the blues—that if we are to say this is an Indigenous blues we inevitably disconnect black ownership from the form. Harjo helps ease that tension because she acknowledges black experience and she comes nervously to the blues (“walks unsteady to the beat”). Black experience lays the foundation for a form that deconstructs and resists the confinements imposed on people of color in the Americas. Harjo uses the cultural weight of the blues to deconstruct negative representations of American Indians and to show her personal and cultural heartaches. In so doing, Harjo sets the tone for the ways in which blues offers Indigenous literature a means of ethnic solidarity and constructive self-representation.

Reservation Blues

If Joy Harjo’s “Everybody Has a Heartache: A Blues” uses the socio-economic and cultural contours of the blues to amplify Indigenous voices, then Sherman Alexie’s 1995 American Book Award-winning novel, *Reservation Blues*, shows how blues music provides new ways for Indigenous people to self-represent while remaining connected with the outside world.

In the novel, cultures collide and a new American literary chord is struck when Thomas Builds-the-Fire meets Robert Johnson at the crossroads on the Spokane Indian Reservation. *Reservation Blues* tells the story of Robert Johnson's convalescence on the reservation and of the rise and fall of the blues-rock band Coyote Springs, made up of Thomas Builds-the-Fire, Chess and Checkers Warm Water, Victor Joseph, Junior Polatkin, and, at times, two young white women named Betty and Veronica. Robert Johnson's presence on the reservation moves the blues from the 1930's Deep South to the 1990's Northwest United States. The blues that Johnson brings to the Spokane reservation provides a "remarkably flexible medium" of opportunity and improvisation to offer what is left of the band— Junior commits suicide and Victor drinks himself into oblivion—the ability to leave the reservation for their own survival (Commentale 31). The reservation, in turn, offers Johnson a place to rest and recuperate. The novel uses blues music to express Indigenous identity, highlight the importance of Indigenous communities, and promote new opportunities on and away from the reservation.

Alexie's novel is representative of the mid-1990s moment when Robert Johnson—his music and mythology—and blues music more generally held a global presence in popular culture. At this point, the blues had garnered a new and diverse audience and become increasingly popular internationally. Vincent Leitch contextualizes the blues' expansion into popular mass culture as symptomatic of postmodernity. He explains that from about 1960-1980 this transition included the "broad spread of the blues outside the black community to whites and also outside the United States to Canada and Europe, especially England" (139). After this period, the blues was "marked by the explosion of reissues (in the new compact disc format) distributed to an increasingly internationalized niche market and catering to (and creating) a nostalgia for old time 'downhome' blues and its styles newly taken up (sometimes too

respectfully) by the rising generation of musicians” (139). After 1980, this change in market and audience created a “postmodern globalization” of the blues—the music and its stylistics, the “scenes” in which it is made and consumed—that has become “multiracial, decentralized, international, and heterogeneous” (140).⁵⁵ Blues, writes Bolden, speaking of literary transformations as well as the music itself, is a “model of dynamism and creolization, constantly assuming new shapes and forms while preserving its distinctiveness” (40).

The 1990 release of *Robert Johnson: The Complete Recordings* is part of the rise of reissues that Leitch mentions. The box set “sold more than 400,000 units within six months of its release and more than 900,000 units within six years” (Lipsitz 119). The release of this CD is congruent with the rise of interest in the story of Robert Johnson as a whole. The story is that Robert Johnson couldn’t play guitar to save his life. To rectify his lack of skill, he went down to the crossroads to sell his soul to the devil in exchange for unparalleled musical ability. Writing in 1998, George Lipsitz explains that in “recent years a series of successful books, documentary films, and television programs has celebrated ‘the search for Robert Johnson’” (119). The search for Johnson promoted his exceptional musical production and its influence on countless performers—Elmore James, John Hammond Jr., and Eric Clapton to name a few—and the mystery that surrounded his potential dealings with the devil. The interest across media that

⁵⁵ Not only does Vincent Leitch provide excellent historical context for how the blues evolves in the 20th century, but he also offers a cultural analysis of the blues scene in Oklahoma City. He writes about two Native American blues groups who play in OKC, the Blackhawk Blues Band and the Blues Nation. He explains that although the Blackhawk Blues Band “entertains at Native events and festivals, it operates for the most part in the mainstream” and “covers primarily classics from the blues repertoire, and its own compositions focus not on Native American themes specifically but traditional blues subjects” (153). The Blues Nation, however, “plays up its Native American roots in its dress, lyrics, and promotional materials” (154). One of their more politically charged and moving numbers, according to Leitch, is the song “My People” where they sing, “My people have a right to sing the blues,/ My people have the right to sing the blues,/ The places we got lied to, oh we got the blues” (156, qtd. in Leitch). The potency of Blues Nation’s performance has led Leitch to “entertain[] the thought that the ‘Indian’ subaltern can speak, using the blues as a medium” (156). Leitch’s cultural studies investigation adds critical weight to my own interrogation of how Indigenous authors appropriate the blues in their writing to express their cultural experiences.

Lipstiz describes articulates the extraordinary cultural capital accrued, more than half a century after his death, by a single blues performer who only lived to be twenty-seven years old. Robert Johnson, both as a figure of American myth and as a musician, is highly consumable and imbued with financial and creative value. Not only does Johnson's music and its ensuing influence on future artists play an important role in American culture, but Robert Johnson, as a figure whose story is steeped in mystery, superstition, and instrumental brilliance, has preoccupied the global imagination.⁵⁶

Robert Johnson has most assuredly occupied Sherman Alexie's imagination. By the time Alexie wrote *Reservation Blues*, he had already depicted Robert Johnson in two other texts, a short story, "Because My Father Always said He was the Only Indian who Saw Jimi Hendrix Play 'The Star-Spangled Banner' at Woodstock" (1993), and a poem, "Red Blues" (1993). In the story, Victor, a young Spokane, grapples with the pain left by his absent alcoholic father and the existential confusion surrounding what it means to be a contemporary traditional American Indian man.⁵⁷ When he misses his father, Victor usually "listen[s] to the blues. Robert Johnson mostly." He continues, "the first time I heard Robert Johnson sing I knew he understood what it meant to be Indian on the edge of the twenty-first century, even if he was black at the beginning of the twentieth" (35). Victor's claim isn't meant to collapse black and Indigenous experience. Instead, heartbreakingly, he simply wants to be recognized and understood. He is doubly isolated: he is an American Indian trying to make his way in a white-dominated world, and he is a man trying to navigate the absence of his father.

⁵⁶ Some recent contributions articulating Robert Johnson's lasting cultural influence are Patricia Schroeder's *Robert Johnson, Mythmaking, and Contemporary Culture* (2004), Adam Gussow's *Beyond the Crossroads: The Devil and the Blues Tradition* (2017), and Bruce Conforth and Gayle Dean Wardlow's *Up Jumped the Devil: The Real Life of Robert Johnson* (2019).

⁵⁷ This is the same Victor that we meet in *Reservation Blues*. Alexie's short story collection, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993), introduces us to Victor, Thomas, and Junior. The collection provides a mixture of important context and, at times, inconsistencies between the two texts.

Sherman Alexie continues his search for Robert Johnson across cultural lines. In the poem “Red Blues” (1993), the narrator emphatically calls out for the bluesman in a later section: “Robert Johnson, Robert Johnson, where is that missing song? Someone told me it was hidden at Sand Creek. Someone told me it was buried near Wounded Knee. Someone told me Crazy Horse never died; he just picked up a slide guitar. Here I am, in the reservation of my mind and I don’t even have a drum” (*Old Shirts* 87). This poem’s title blends culturally specific experience—“Red Blues” becomes American Indian vernacular expression through an African American idiom—to create a collective minority voice. Crazy Horse, the celebrated American Indian hero, plays a slide guitar to engage an idiom that offers a stage for his cultural expression. Alexie suggests that Johnson’s “missing song”—Robert Johnson was contracted to record 30 songs but only 29 exist—is Crazy Horse’s song too. By deconstructing the historical identities of Robert Johnson and Crazy Horse, this stanza acts as a site of multiethnic transcultural community. Alexie’s poem becomes “the means for the narrator to tell his collective history,” and this history “allows for mediation of the historical past with the present” (Hafen 66). This blues poem reflects upon the impact of Crazy Horse’s life as collective American Indian history and the narrator’s yearning to find his own voice. In the space of this stanza, African American and American Indian cultures blend. Music and memory are shared to find a voice that strives to be heard—be it with guitar or drum.

Jennifer Gillan argues that Alexie “struggles to find words to articulate his pain” created by a government that “required American Indian children to attend federal boarding schools” and “depriv[ed] Indians of their right even to speak their own language” (Gillan 208). The blues idiom allows Alexie to express a reservation blues state of mind that connects a blues figure, and his historical implications, with the experience of Indigenous people under settler colonialism.

Alexie uses the blues to deconstruct the image of the Noble Savage, where “Indians become a mythological safety valve, a life preserver for an American culture slowly sinking under the weight of its own industrial and technological present” (Gillan 207). Instead, he shows how American popular culture weighs on Indigenous identity and provides an experience that has been elided from the national social imagination. By using Johnson as a guide into an already appropriated, but not silenced, idiom (the popular blues), Alexie articulates the complicated experience of Indigenous life that is simultaneously plagued by the scars of history and daily hardships and bolstered by community, culture, and tradition.

By the time Alexie gets to *Reservation Blues*, he makes it clear that he is interested in the myth surrounding Johnson’s deal with the devil at the crossroads, but only as developed through the bluesman’s interactions on the contemporary reservation. In Alexie’s representation of the bluesman, Robert Johnson offers the citizens of the Spokane Indian Nation a new expressive idiom. This exchange is not solely beneficial for the Spokane; Johnson’s life is extended, and he finds reprieve from the Gentleman’s—Alexie’s stand-in for the devil figure in the Johnson myth—grip on his freedom. At the beginning of *Reservation Blues*, Robert Johnson “show[s] up at the crossroads” wearing a “ragged,” “brown suit” (3). He is “old and tired,” and he tells Thomas that he has “walked from crossroads to crossroads” in search of a woman who “rode into his dreams as a shadow on a shadowy horse, with songs that he loved but could not sing because the Gentleman might hear” (6). The Gentleman “held the majority of stock in Robert Johnson’s soul and had chased Robert Johnson for decades. Since 1938, the year he faked his death by poisoning and made his escape, Johnson had been running from the Gentleman, who narrowly missed him at every stop” (6). Johnson is alive and searching for a reprieve from his majority stockholder on the Spokane reservation in 1992. This economic language is a marker of the

bluesman's newly resurgent popularity among white blues aficionados and a broader rock audience and reminds us that Johnson receives no money from his new-found fame. He is old and tired due to the global inflation of his "stock": the numerous iterations of his music, the constant search for him by music fans and researchers alike, John Fusco's 1986 film, *Crossroads*, and especially the 1990 release of his collected works. The reservation offers Johnson sanctuary from the Gentleman as well as his newfound celebrity. Where better to hide than somewhere that has already been forgotten by the world?

In Alexie's interpretation, Johnson has been at various crossroads in search of healing from the "sickness" that he has contracted from his "bad deal" (*Reservation Blues* 6). The crossroads, as a symbolic space, acts as a site of exchange—the place where the deal goes down—but it is also an intersection of "constant transit between the tenant shack and the railroad, the back porch and the recording studio, tradition and modernity" (Commentale 46). Much like Harjo's terminal, the crossroads are a site of opportunity that blend movement to and from home, experiences amongst and between domestic and economic pursuits, and productive connections to tradition while surviving in an increasingly modernized world. At the Wellpinit crossroads, Johnson exchanges his guitar for access to the reservation in order to meet with Big Mom—the medicine woman on the hill. Johnson's guitar becomes the central talisman for developing the band and unearthing the blues feelings that the members of Coyote Springs experience during the novel. This moment introduces Johnson's myth to the reservation while simultaneously introducing the reader to Wellpinit. The "crossroads near the softball diamond" (*Reservation Blues* 3) introduces the reservation "hidden away in the corner of the world" (16). When Thomas accepts Johnson's guitar, American Indian space and secrets are exposed to the pressures of an increasingly globalized world. Effectively navigating the crossroads can

reconfigure “conventional notions of identity—racial or otherwise—to establish both a new aesthetic and a more flexible, more satisfying form of existence” (Commentale 46). Both Johnson and Thomas are offered an opportunity to engage with the pressures of daily life in a new and dynamic fashion.

The crossroads also act as a space of dispossession and a reminder of white oppression enacted on black and brown bodies. Later in the novel, Johnson recalls his experience at the original Deep South crossroads where the Gentleman, “a handsome white man” who “wore a perfectly pressed black suit in the hot Mississippi heat,” approaches him (*Reservation Blues* 264). By marking both the race and the quality of clothes of the Gentleman, Alexie establishes a familiar power dynamic between privileged wealthy white men and poor black men in the South. This white man can give Johnson what he desires in exchange for his freedom, an offer that invokes the history of slavery and systems of disciplinary violence that have effectively stymied the freedom of African Americans. When the Gentleman asks Johnson what he loves the most (his freedom), he “felt the whip that split open the skin on his grandfathers’ backs. He heard the creak of the floorboard as the white masters crept into his grandmothers’ bedrooms” (264). And, perhaps surprisingly, when Johnson exchanges his freedom for unrivaled guitar prowess “the horses screamed” (265)—a conceit repeated throughout the novel that recalls Colonel George Wright’s 1858 slaughter of 800 Spokane horses. The scene, as imagined by Alexie, becomes marked by colonial atrocities upon multiple American minorities. At this moment, Johnson is a member of two ethnic groups: he is an African American, connected to a history of slavery and Jim Crow laws—signaled by whipping and rape—and he is welcomed into an American Indian space marked by militarized destruction and ghettoization—signified by the destruction of the

horses. His experience with the white Gentleman evokes failed promises and dangerous minority exchanges with the white US majority as a whole.

Alexie does not allow this exchange to be simply about whites continuing to oppress and take advantage of minorities in America. In fact, such a continuation of white dominance only mirrors the historical systems of cultural contact. By being white, the devil figure limits the “chance for genuine or beneficial cultural exchange to occur” because he reproduces a slave economy (Andrews 150)—the white Gentleman controls Johnson’s freedom and labor. In order to reconfigure this type of cultural, and economic, transaction, Alexie engages the longer history of the Gentleman as a trickster figure. According to David Evans, in some interpretations of the Johnson myth, the devil figure is “viewed as a thinly disguised version of a West African trickster deity, such as Dahomean Legba or the Yoruba Eshu” (“Robert Johnson” 12). Much like the devil in western folk Christianity, the West African trickster deities “have symbolic connections with crossroads” (12). This cultural connection is not lost on Alexie. In the “Acknowledgments” of *Reservation Blues*, Alexie mentions the “influence of the Columbia Pictures film *Crossroads*, directed by Walter Hill and written by John Fusco” (n.p.). In the film *Crossroads*, the figure that does the soul dealing is called Legba, not the devil.⁵⁸

Alexie’s representation of the Gentleman is a pastiche that injects the American Indian trickster figure, Coyote, into Johnson’s story. When the deal goes down at the crossroads, the Gentleman’s “*lupine* eyes caught the sunlight in a strange way, reflecting colors that Johnson had never seen before” (*Reservation Blues* 264, emphasis mine). By relating the Gentleman’s eyes to those of a wolf, Alexie establishes a connection to the coyote (both members of the genus *canus*). This connection to Coyote changes the western notion of the evil devil figure into an

⁵⁸ Adam Gussow, in his *Beyond the Crossroads: The Devil and the Blues Tradition* (2017), investigates the use of Legba in the film *Crossroads*. See pages 231-254.

Indigenous trickster that offers an opportunity to learn more about Johnson's connection to the world around him. In the prefatory material of his novel *Kiss of the Fur Queen* (1998), Tomson Highway (Cree) explains that the trickster "goes by many names and guises," including Coyote, and that his/her "role is to teach us about the nature and the meaning of existence" (n.p.).

Inasmuch as it's Coyote who makes the deal with Johnson, the new colors Johnson sees shining in the Gentleman's eyes may signify an exposure to new experiences, including the suffering and possibilities found on the Spokane Reservation.

In his journal, Thomas Builds-the-Fire offers three different definitions of Coyote to show the trickster figure's rooted connection to American Indian, African American, and American culture. Coyote is i) "closely related to the American wolf and whose cry has often been compared to that of Sippie Wallace and Janis Joplin;" ii) "a traditional figure in Native American mythology;" and/or iii) "a trickster whose bag of tricks contains permutations of love, hate, weather, chance, laughter, and tears, e.g., Lucille Ball" (*Reservation Blues* 48). According to Thomas's approximation, Coyote is linked to popular culture through all female black and white representatives of American culture. Coyote is aligned with the blues star, Sippie Wallace, the first lady of Rock 'n' Roll, Janis Joplin, and even the television comedienne, Lucille Ball. By doing so, Alexie shows that American Indians are very much involved in and aware of American popular culture, even if they are themselves pushed to the periphery. Ethnomusicologist David Evans argues that the blues "appear to be expressions of people at the margins of an already marginalized society, the periphery of the fringe, so to speak, and they deal with carnal love, hate, rivalry, control and victimization . . . being lonesome and having 'rambling on my mind'" ("Traditional Blues" 26). Coyote offers Indigenous people access to the blues because he/she embodies these same emotions and states of being.

Johnson is able to stay on the reservation both because he is accepted by the Spokane and because he wants to offer them his music. Johnson's blues unsettles the Spokane Indians. When he sings the first verse of "Preaching Blues (Up Jumped the Devil)," the "reservation exhaled. Those blues created memories for the Spokane, but they refused to claim them. Those blues lit up a new road, but the Spokane pulled out their old maps. Those blues churned up generations of anger and pain: car wrecks, suicides, murders. Those blues were ancient, aboriginal, indigenous" (174). Even if we accept Blythe Tellefesen's claim that the Spokane "reject the healing" that Johnson offers, his blues invites a self-reflection that unearths the traumas and tragedies found on the reservation (Tellefesen 135). What the Spokane really reject here are the memories—the blues feelings—exhumed by hearing Johnson's blues. Earlier in the novel, Johnson's guitar tells Thomas, "The blues always make us remember" (*Reservation Blues* 22). The blues feelings suffered by the members of the Spokane nation are reawakened by Johnson's music, which is no longer solely his own but has been marked as "ancient, aboriginal, indigenous." If this is so, then Johnson is warranted when he later claims that "this Tribe's been waitin' for me for a long time" and that "these Indians might need me. Maybe need my music" (303). Johnson and his music become a site for cultural exchange and self-reflection, exposing the buried sorrow of the Spokane Nation.

By the end of the novel, the Spokane create a blues idiom of their own. In a subtle nod to the Spokane's hesitant approach to the healing powers of blues music, Alexie has Johnson offer his blues again, but this time in the form of a duet with The-man-who-was-probably-Lakota. Johnson "pulled out his harmonica and blew a few chords" and The-man-who-was-probably-Lakota "played along on his hand drum" (304; 305). Their performance produces something wholly new for the novel: a multiethnic duet that combines black and indigenous sounds. While

the people of Wellpinit might not have been ready to accept Johnson's blues, The-man-who-was-probably-Lakota's addition of the drum provides an avenue to express their blues feelings through a recognizable form. Johnson and the Spokane create a space of cultural exchange that offers new tools to express their peculiar experiences in the world. Alexie's Indigenously inflected blues develops a sense of mutual growth, self-recognition and a moment of individual and collective reckoning for Johnson and the Spokane. This moment suggests that blues, as an alternative mode of self-expression distinct from white culture, allows for a space to develop a cultural sound at the pitch of multi-ethnic solidarity.

And yet, despite the positive cultural interaction between Johnson and the Spokane, the pressures imposed by white audience members (and Alexie's white readers) belie an anxiety in cultural contact where minorities risk performing minstrelsy or tokenism. The performer (or the author) must accurately and fairly present a version of Indigeneity that doesn't reproduce stereotypes or create characters as archetypes of indigenous perfection, lacking the textures and imperfections of real people. There is also a pressure to perform a certain type of belonging that depicts Indigenous identity as part of American culture. To bridge the gap between Indigenous identity and (white) national culture, Alexie fills his novel with numerous popular culture references. Gloria Bird (Spokane) argues that Alexie's use of popular culture "does not serve as either a parody or a serious interrogation" but only as a device that carries "the story from one subject to another" (47). Bird's argument presumes that Alexie can only decolonize by rejecting white culture. Alexie, instead, opts for ownership. He uses pop culture in a sort of *laissez faire* manner to show a cultural fluidity that denies strict forms of expected racial performances. For example, when Coyote Springs performs "for the cowboys in Toadstools Tavern," one audience member claims, "I think the highlight of the night was when the Indians sang 'Mommas, Don't

Let Your Babies Grow up to Be Cowboys.’ Everybody sang along with that one” (*Reservation Blues* 89, 90). The band plays country music as a way of engaging with their audience and simultaneously subverting expectations. By playing a Waylon Jennings song, the band shows the stakes for survival outside of the reservation: they are underrepresented members of the national demographic in a “Cowboy Bar” (of all places), and they must be savvy performers willing to indulge the tastes of their Anglo audience. However, an inherent irony lays in the song’s title: The Cowboys in the bar don’t understand that the song asks for fewer cowboys, fewer purveyors of Horace Greeley’s famous imperative “Go West, young man.” Coyote Springs’ performance pleases the ears of their white audience by offering them something familiar while signifying on a colonial figure of Indigenous destruction. However, Coyote Springs’s transgressive resistance runs the risk of being forced into a limited identity whose sole purpose is to appease white desire and affirm white expectations.

As the band becomes increasingly popular and innovative, their Indigenous blues exposes them to a mainstream that desires to label and package them as a commodity and to control their creative output. Consider the ways black vernacular sound has been commodified. Karl Hagstrom Miller explains in *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (2010) that “regimes of white supremacy and segregation . . . more systematically targeted racialized bodies than racialized sound” (15) but that an “emergent musical color line” powered by economic more than social considerations “eventually brought the logic of segregation into the realm of sound and style, linking sonic signifiers of race to the corporeal bodies and physical landscapes that Jim Crow already had been trying to contain for several decades” (15). Miller argues that music production is socially linked to a racialized organizing logic that develops and perpetuates various stereotypes—only black folks can sing or have the blues—and disallows an

integrative impulse in crossover musical genres: the liberty that comes with developing one's own music is limited by the expectations of the audience and record labels.

Near the end of the novel, Coyote Springs is invited to perform for record executives in New York City where the nuances of their indigenous identity and sound are threatened by white colonial control in its various permutations. The record executives George Wright and Phil Sheridan—who are also the US Army officers that helped wrestle the west from Indigenous control—are stand-ins for the larger national history of militarized oppression as well as a newer form of capitalistic social control, race-based pop music. Wright claims that Mr. Armstrong (as in General George Armstrong Custer) has to “like these guys. Indians are big these days ... Besides, these Indians are way good” (*Reservation Blues* 223). Whether or not the band is good, Sheridan is only concerned with the “need to make money” (223). Throughout this scene, the “horses scream,” marking the interaction with the music executives as irreparably damaging if the band were to make a deal with these gentlemen. It is here that we see the familiar capitalistic impulse to create forms of race music identified by Miller. The record company wants something that is Indian enough to package, market, and sell. It also creates a new racially specific musical genre that is marked by difference and pushes it simultaneously to the margins and into mainstream culture. The creation of a strict musical color line limits how musical genres influence one another across generic (and racial) lines. Coyote Springs is at a crossroads of their own. They can establish an Indigenous Blues Rock music and provide public access to Indigenous voices and cultural variations on a popular form, but only by ceding creative control to the white record executives and making themselves into caricatures of their “Indianness.”

Coyote Springs, an amalgam of Indigenous, blues, and Rock ‘n’ Roll musical cultures and histories, complicates how culture is represented by those who control the music’s

production. Thomas Builds-the-Fire claims in a radio interview that “we’re not stealing the music” and an “Indian woman invented the blues a day before Columbus landed, and rock ‘n’ roll the next day” (*Reservation Blues* 157-8). Thomas acknowledges the accepted history that blues is the ancestor of Rock ‘n’ Roll, but he makes a sovereign claim for the origination of America’s most formative musics. If the music is American, then the first “American” people are going to claim credit. Thomas’s claim disconnects the blues from African American experience and how the form celebrates the liberties that came with emancipation—where blues represents the new freedoms that come with the ability to travel and choose sexual partners.⁵⁹ His claim also alters the origin story of Rock ‘n’ Roll—coming out of Sun Records in Memphis when Ike Turner shoved a piece of newspaper in the broken cone of his amp to provide that distorted sound in “Rocket 88” and with the later rise of the King, Elvis Presley. Thomas’s Indigenous-owned blues and Rock ‘n’ Roll denies these important American histories and offers, instead, an Indigenous-centric model that places the origins of the blues before settler contact—a claim that completely decenters the lived history of African Americans and their accounts of striving to create cultural centers of their own.

Thomas’s claim, though, does make an important rhetorical move to position Indigenous culture not as one that subsumes popular culture but one that provides the origins to national narratives. Tellefesen argues that, if an Indian woman is responsible for creating American popular music, it “creates ‘Americanness’ as a kind of derivative Indianness” (131), which “empowers Indians as active subjects and creators” (132). By having Native Americans be the creators of African American vernacular expression and American popular music, the national

⁵⁹ For more on this argument, see Angela Y. Davis’ chapter “I Used to Be Your Sweet Mama: Ideology, Sexuality, and Domesticity” in her book *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*.

popular conception of what it means to be Indigenous, black, or white is destabilized. Putting popular conceptions of race and culture into flux develops “new dimensions for dealing with the formation of transcultural identities in a modern world undergoing permanent change” (Fitz and Gross 420). The novel works against a divisive set of cultural expectations and offers a synthesized American identity. In line with Houston Baker’s understanding of the blues, Alexie reframes American history as a contemporary matrix that imposes a feeling of simultaneous “impulses . . . in productive transit” (Baker 3). History becomes a forum for transcultural exchange and survival in an increasingly global and industrialized world. By reconfiguring the history of two related and influential American musical idioms, Alexie puts American Indian culture at the center of American identity. Thomas is, after all, a storyteller, and, while his claim might seem farfetched or tongue-in-cheek, he asks the radio audience to consider how an Indigenous cultural variation begets American history.

The novel continues to develop the context surrounding an Indigenous blues sound that signifies on Indigenous experience under colonial rule. In his essay “Any Day Now: Black Art and Black Liberation” (1968), Larry Neal, a Black Arts movement intellectual, explains that the blues have an important function, where they “don’t jive. They reach way down into the maw of the individual and collective experience” (Neal 425). The blues as cultural aesthetic, in the case of Neal’s essay, function as a means to express personal and community desires, successes, suffering. In *Reservation Blues*, Big Mom plays the “loneliest chord that the band had ever heard” on her guitar, an instrument “made of a 1965 Malibu and the blood of a child killed at Wounded Knee in 1890” (206). At this moment, the band realizes that their cultural experience has a specific sound. Big Mom tells them that “all Indians know how to play that chord,” that it “was created especially” for them (207). According to P. Jane Hafen, “Big Mom’s chord is the

genetic memory that unites diverse Indian peoples. It is the narrative chord that escapes specific musicality yet resonates through regenerative storytelling. The chord has the particular contemporary overtones that reverberate through mythic time and Spokane sensibilities” (68). This chord, then, is the indigenous sound that Alexie uses as the foundation for his novelistic blues, a form of contemporary storytelling that “disseminate[s] a history that frequently goes unrecorded or forgotten” (Ford 172). This single sound unites a people, signifies on a history of colonization and social elision, and demands to be heard. Alexie enters American Indians into the American social imagination through the co-option of African American vernacular expression and American popular culture. By doing so, he demands that American identity be seen as culturally specific but also transcultural; an identity that is multifaceted and predicated on popular consumption of racial and cultural social codes.

At the end of the novel, Coyote Springs leaves the reservation because the band members have consciously accepted the felt burden of their history, rather than remaining numb to it, and embraced the way in which blues offers them access to the outside world. With a final return to his overarching conceit, Alexie has the band followed by the shadows of the 800 slaughtered Spokane horses. The specters of the horses show the weight of traumatic history that colonized subjects carry and reminds the reader how American colonial control limited the movements of the Spokane nation. This final image is extraordinarily powerful because it denies the military’s attempt to limit travel and reinforces the historical scars that the band must bear. By leaving, the members of Coyote Springs are able to find songs that “were waiting for them up there in the dark. Songs were waiting for them in the city” (306). They remove themselves from the periphery that is the reservation and into the urban center of Spokane where they can use their new blues sound to further develop their Indigeneity.

What is perhaps the most striking about the transcultural exchange in *Reservation Blues* is that Alexie is at the forefront of a shift in blues fiction. Alexie is one of the first to use blues fiction to express the experiences of blues communities not solely coded as African American. Alexie is not alone in his desire to use blues, and Robert Johnson, to effect transculturation. In his 1995 novel *R.L.'s Dream*, set in contemporary New York City, Walter Mosley's Robert Johnson haunts the memories of the over-the-hill cancer-ridden bluesman Atwater "Soup Spoon" Wise. Soup Spoon is taken in by a young white southern woman named Kiki. Together they find new ways of coping with the traumas of their pasts. In a moment where an impromptu jam session develops, Soup Spoon realizes "that they were playing music. These children weren't even born when he came around but they were playing his music. They were living it too" (182). As the people surrounding Soup Spoon become increasingly diverse and contemporary, *R.L.'s Dream* "transforms the potentialities of a cultural form that is very much associated with black life into a harbinger of a different sort of community, based on sharing and emotional involvement, and independent of race" (Levecq 248). Johnson, and the blues, allow black and American Indian writers to articulate the contemporary tensions of a society that is becoming globalized and diversified at an accelerated rate. Patricia Schroeder argues that Alexie and Mosley "depict Johnson's blues and their own art of storytelling as powerful agents of multicultural transmission" (114). Schroeder's claim contextualizes the functional change in blues literature.

Instead of solely attempting to articulate black experience in America—as, say, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* do—blues literature has also become a way of articulating contemporary Indigenous experience.⁶⁰ As we

⁶⁰ In his essay, "Is or Ain't Your Blues Like Mine? A Brief Critical History of White Blues Literature," Adam Gussow offers a similar hypothesis. He proposes that "blues literature at the dawn of the second millennium can no

recognize that blues music has become a component of mainstream culture, we see that this transition into the social imagination is one that helps to mediate how blues can function within literature. Alexie's use of Johnson as a representative figure of the blues is indicative of the increase in Johnson's popularity through the rerelease of his collected recordings and the story surrounding his life reaching mythical heights. Alexie's appropriation of the blues develops a personalized idiom that provides cultural expression and identity creation. Alexie's Indigenous blues are symptomatic of a desire for self-expression within the larger narrative of the social imagination. A narrative that becomes increasingly diverse and nuanced. Alexie's blues welcome the world to life on the reservation and open the reservation to a larger decolonizing world.

Whose Blues?

At the beginning of this chapter I asked, "what do the blues offer Indigenous audiences and literature?" The blues, I argue, offer a new way to share Indigenous stories, provide access to Indigenous life and culture, and create empathetic transcultural communities. When Indigenous authors write their blues, a multiethnic solidarity forms in resistance to colonial social structures. I would like to conclude by considering what the addition of Indigenous experience offers blues literature.

At face value it seems to be a perplexing problem that Sherman Alexie attributes his introduction to Robert Johnson through John Fusco's film *Crossroads*. Written by Fusco and directed by Walter Hill, both white men, the film is about young Eugene "Lightning Boy" Martone's (Ralph Macchio) obsession with Robert Johnson's purportedly lost song. Julliard-

longer be considered exclusively a subset of African American literature. As a group, non-African American writers—which is to say, white and Jewish Americans, Native Americans, Anglo- and Native Canadians, and Frenchmen—have simply contributed too many blues-themed, blues-voiced texts to be ignored" (121).

trained Martone breaks Johnson's longtime friend Willy Brown (Joe Seneca) out of a minimum-security prison hospital in New York, and they go on an odyssey down into the Mississippi Delta, complete with a deal with Legba at the crossroads and a searing guitar battle against Jack Butler (Steve Vai), a "big white fella from Memphis." In the film, the blues is mediated through white men; the writing, directing, music (directed by talented musician Ry Cooder), and the arc of the story, where Eugene becomes the inheritor of the blues, are all products of white creation and focus on rationalizing a white connection to the blues. Adam Gussow suggests that the film is a "fantasy about the problem of succession as it materializes within an increasingly white 'legitimate' blues scene constituted by aficionados and fans, blues societies and organizations, magazines (especially *Living Blues*), festivals and club gigs, but above all by awards ceremonies, including the W.C. Handy Awards and the Grammys" (*Beyond the Crossroads* 235). All of which suggests that Alexie's interaction with the blues has already been tainted by white mediation. Or, at the very least, that the figure of Robert Johnson that comes to Alexie has been reshaped into mythic proportions simply through the white fervor to know more about this unknowable bluesman and to take over the blues through "legitimate" means and categorization.

To a certain extent this claim is undeniable, but it doesn't fully capture what Alexie does with Johnson. In each of Alexie's iterations of Johnson, he is a solo figure. It is only in *Reservation Blues* that he is pursued by a white man, who, as I argued, is likely a trickster figure providing a lesson Johnson is unlikely to forget: to be careful when making deals with white men in suits; they will take your land, freedom, and even your soul. Yet, Johnson acts as a figure that mediates Alexie's crossroads where Indigeneity and popular American culture intersect. While the film *Crossroads* provides a blues odyssey searching for the last vestiges of Johnson's legacy (his missing song), Alexie provides the embodiment of Johnson in his writing. Alexie isn't

worried about searching for him. Johnson instead is living happily on a reservation in Washington state. Alexie's contribution to blues literature is that he gives Robert Johnson a voice. Alexie shows the flexibility of the genre to depict other ways of life beyond the African American canon while remaining distinctively the blues. The larger concern surrounding Alexie's appropriation of Johnson is that he leaves Johnson and the blues once he has established a platform for his voice, one that no longer needs black cultural mediation. Alexie leaves the blues to engage Indigenous life on the reservation and in urban centers head-on.

Alexie's title and use of a blues figure like Robert Johnson, and Joy Harjo's subtitle "A Blues," readily signals their texts as part of a blues literary canon. But, how do we understand the role the blues play when the connection is not necessarily so straightforward? For example, in Richard Wagamese's novel *Keeper 'n' Me*, blues is not immediately signaled by the title. The music, though, becomes a central means for the main character Garnet Raven's homecoming on the White Dog Ojibway Reservation. Raven is a young Indigenous man who fell victim to the Canadian federal government's ill-advised enforced foster program for Indigenous children, popular in the 1960s, later known as the "Sixties Scoop." Garnet is left without any connection to his family, community, or culture, and he begins to think of himself as a "brown white guy" (17). The novel begins with him wandering the streets of Toronto until he meets Lonnie Johnson, a hip young black man who introduces Garnet to the blues, and, simultaneously, to a new way of operating in the world:

I fell in love with the blues when I was twenty. Something in the music sorta bumped up against something deep inside me and made it move. Maybe it was the built-in lonely that got me, or the moving, searching, losing and fightin' for a living that good blues singers gotta do before they can really put it out there. I don't know for sure what it was, but the

first time I heard it I was hooked. Still love the sound of the blues late at night. Kinda fits in with the sounds of the north. All that moanin' and cryin' goes real good with a dark, dark night, the wind howling through the trees and a fire going real good in the cabin . . . Guess maybe us Indians have a lot in common with our black brothers and sisters when it comes to bein' blue about things. (20)

All the tenets of the blues are present in Garnet's connection to the form—we see striving, resisting oppressive limitations, constant evolution, loss and success. The most important element for Garnet is that he recognizes himself in that tumultuous flow. He connects to human sounds of pain and success in ways that he didn't feel were possible before. His loneliness resonates in the loneliness he hears in the blues singer's voice and music. This moment is an awakening for Garnet, in which he both recognizes himself and realizes that there is a community with which he can identify. The music converts Garnet. He begins to dress and act like a black man until he is arrested and his biological family contacts him while he is in prison. While he later exchanges the blues for a drum and becomes the keeper of tradition for his reservation, the blues are what get him there.

For the blues, this perhaps unexpected addition of Indigenous experience and culture, these "sounds of the north," extends the form's ethnic and geographic umbrella. The form draws in those who are tired of the constraints and pressures of white-dominated social mores. Larry Neal, in his manifesto for the power of blues as the central aesthetic to black art, effectively expresses this expansive multiethnic framework I'm arguing for now: "So when *we* speak of an aesthetic, we mean *more* than the process of making art, of telling stories, of writing poems, of performing plays. We also mean the destruction of the white thing. We mean the destruction of white ways of looking at the world" (426, emphasis in original). The blues are a tool of

decolonization that provide a means of self-expression in opposition to white expectations. The aesthetic acts as a beacon for those who feel left on the outside looking in. And, in return, these incoming outsiders add their experience to the form.

Blues in the music and its representations in literature express experiences of precarity engendered by systems of inequality. It is this facet of the blues that Drew Hayden Taylor takes up in his blues quartet. Taylor, an Ojibway-Canadian playwright, signifies his use of the blues in his play's titles: *The Bootlegger Blues* (1991), *The Baby Blues* (1999), *The Buz'Gem Blues* (2002), and *The Berlin Blues* (2007). Each play takes on different elements of daily Indigenous experience, mainly Ojibway. They are all comedies and are linked only through recurring characters (for example, some of the characters in *Bootlegger Blues* show up in *The Berlin Blues*, but not in the other plays). *Bootlegger Blues* is a humorous story surrounding Martha, a good Christian Ojibway woman, who bootlegs beer on the reservation because of a miscommunication while preparing for a church community dinner. The play also features adultery, the blossoming of young love, and Taylor's own blues song, which provides the name for the play. Set on the reservation, the play is cast with only Indigenous characters.

The Baby Blues is set on the reservation during a powwow. Noble, a dancer, returns a bit worse for the wear and older. The play's climax is the revelation that the young girl, Pashik, is the product of Noble's and Jenny's infidelity in the *Bootlegger Blues*. The play brings the fun and promiscuity of the powwow season to the stage. *The Buz'Gem Blues* investigates love and sex amongst Elders and what it means to be "Indian." Taylor playfully humanizes Elders and reminds the audience that everyone wants to be loved. And, the most global play, *The Berlin Blues* sets the scene for white obsession with idealized Indigenous ways of being. Two Germans, Birgit and Reinhart, propose to develop an Ojibway theme park—OjibwayWorld—on the

reservation, complete with “Medicine Ferris Wheel,” “Four Directions shuttle service,” “Turtle Island Aquarium,” and even the “Weesageechak Water Slide” (19). The play is rife with humor, and it shows a contemporary tension between bringing industry and money to the reservation and resisting the capitalistic impulse to sell their Indigenous souls to pan-Indian, vacuous, business models. Taylor asks if there is ever a “right” way to capitalize on your culture and traditions. The play ends with the theme park failing, literally crushed by rampaging buffalo, and the Ojibway relieved to have their land and identities back.

The striking element about Taylor’s blues quartet is that none of the plays are concerned with relating to the blues in an easily-recognizable way. Taylor writes his own blues songs in some plays; in others, not. But the plays’ overarching objective is to place the reservation and Indigenous people center stage, under the spotlight. In the *Baby Blues* one of the characters says, “The real difference between White people and Native people is: Native people have a round dance; White people have a square dance” (40). Taylor’s plays lack sharp white edges and focus, instead, on “intercultural clichés and intracultural difficulties such as family life and love relationships” (Däwes 3). Leroy Little Bear, in his essay, “Jagged Worldviews Colliding,” explains that “one of the problems with colonialism is that it tries to maintain a singular social order by means of force and law, suppressing the diversity of human worldviews. The underlying differences between Aboriginal and Eurocentric worldviews make this a tenuous proposition at best. Typically, this proposition creates oppression and discrimination” (1). Taylor provides his unflinching worldview—one where everyone, native or white, has their flaws and redeeming qualities—and shows that Indigenous life is full of love, laughter, and humanity.

Taylor’s other blues play, *Cerulean Blue* (2015), is a departure, where he pays more attention to blues music and history and to who is interested in controlling contemporary blues

narratives. The play follows the band, Cerulean Blue, as they go to Dead Rat River First Nations to play a fundraising concert. The reservation is the site of a federal dispute over mineral rights between activist First Nations and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP). The racial tension on the reservation is mirrored by the interaction between white lead singer Russell and the newest band member, Billy, an Indigenous guitar player and singer. To make matters more tense, Billy is dating Pauline, Russell's sister. The genesis of Taylor's *Cerulean Blue* came from a request to write a play for the graduating class of the Ryerson Theatre School while he was the 2013 writer-in-residence in the Faculty of Arts at Ryerson University, in Toronto. Taylor felt a bit daunted by the task because the graduating class had twenty students—a huge cast when it comes to writing a play—and, as he explains, “none of the actors in that year's acting program were Native” (“Playwright's Note”). These issues are abundantly clear. The play is bursting at the seams with characters, and it has noticeably more white characters with leading roles than the four other blues plays.

Taylor's addition of white actors, however, does provide a satirical examination of white blues fans/musicians. The increasing white “legitimization” of blues music, history, and culture through academic studies, organizations, magazines, and awards has created a generation of white blues aficionados who become genre gatekeepers and purveyors of blues knowledge.

When Billy is introduced to Russell to potentially join the band, Russell immediately asks:

RUSSELL

So what do you know about the blues?

BILLY

It can be kind of depressing. Just like your song. You ever listen to any of those old-time blues artists? Man, you can tell they had it rough. And I thought we Aboriginals had it tough. I used to think they should have called it the “reds” instead of the “blues.” (*laughs*)

RUSSELL

Yes, very funny. Thanks for the keen insight.

BILLY

I do what I can. Anyway, what’s a nice white boy like you doing playing the blues? Get a flat tire one morning? Your *Globe and Mail* subscription run out?

Now it’s PAULINE’s turn to laugh

RUSSELL

That’s ... amusing. I’m truly amused. The mystique behind the blues sound goes beyond colour, beyond socio-economic history, it’s pan-racial cry of acknowledged injustice that sees no boundaries ...

BILLY

I’m sure that’s exactly what Robert Johnson would say. (18)

Because he is unable to relate to the music through a position of racialized colonial other—the multi-ethnic affinity that Billy jokingly alludes to—Russell reinscribes the blues’s political and cultural value so that he is included. Russell’s fragile position of blues gatekeeper is made even more so by Billy’s invocation of Robert Johnson, who, as we have seen, was an obscure figure who found fame about fifty years after his death, fame propagated through white mediation.

In *Cerulean Blue*, Taylor challenges rigid essentialist ideas of what the blues are. At one moment, Billy wants to purify the band with sweet grass, a smudge, and Russell responds, “We’re a rough-and-ready blues band. We don’t purify” (38). Russell’s conception of the blues,

and the way he interacts with Indigenous people throughout the play, is unnecessarily constrained and overtly structured. Russell is more concerned with recreating an “authentic” blues band—an already absurd and failed endeavor—than he is concerned with being flexible in his interactions with Billy, a racialized colonial subject. Russell’s white appropriation of the blues fulfills Perry Hall’s claim that white folks love black sound but despise their black faces. Russell loves black sound but despises all faces of color. However, in the way that Taylor’s plays provide both happy endings and moral imperatives, by the end of the play, Russell and Billy reconcile after a brawl and an overnight stay in jail, where they are forced to work out their differences. The final iteration of the band, Cerulean Blue 3.0, shows a change in aesthetics, from performing “modernist blues music” (81) to describing themselves as an “experimental and evolutionary foray into the DNA of conventional blues music” (129). This change in the band’s artistic outlook signals a change in Russell: his rigid outlook has become more fluid, giving him the ability to recognize the humanity of Indigenous people.

Taylor’s more overt use of the blues in this play signals many of the elements brought forward in this chapter. The blues here are far more recognizable in a play that Taylor needed to include more white actors. While Taylor seemed unconcerned with how he used the blues or portrayed it in his Blues Quartet, his use of the blues in *Cerulean Blue* is easily recognizable. The reservation becomes central in this play, and the blues are what get us there. Taylor’s blues aren’t solely about white cultural self-certification, but about the ugly tension between federal systems that continue to capitalize on Indigenous land and the Indigenous people who demand land sovereignty and to be recognized as human and worth protecting. In *Cerulean Blue*, the blues provide access to a space for racial recognition and cultural expression, even if it is heavy-handed and established with a cloying satirical wink.

Adding Taylor's plays, Wagamese's and Alexie's novels, and Harjo's poem to the blues literary canon asks the blues to expand, but it also revitalizes our understanding of what blues literature is. In a world where culture is accessible by the click of a mouse, radio waves, and television, the blues adapt and survive through new audiences and iterations of its distinctive form. Tony Bolden explains that the blues have a "propensity for synthesis an amorphous form, the blues are characterized by both subsumption and infusion. In fact, the blues are themselves products of hybridization" (39). The blues have no specific shape but are always recognizable. Bolden's notion of subsumption and infusion is particularly apt because the blues subsume Indigenous experience and infuse Indigenous literature with its distinctive textures and sounds. The blues "comprise a meditational site where familiar antimonies are resolved (or dissolved) in the office of adequate cultural understanding" (Baker 6). The blues are a way to understand laughing to keep from crying, loving to hate, hating to love, dying to live, or living to die. By adding Indigenous experience to the form, the blues' structures of resistance come forward and attest to new ways of existing in the world.

Chapter 4 – Blues, Blackness, and *African-Canadianité*

Dear Massa Swille:
What it was?
I have done my Liza Leap
& am safe in the arms
of Canada, so
Ain't no use your Slave
Catchers waitin on me
At Trailways
I won't be there

Flight to Canada, Ishmael Reed (1976)

Founded in 1783 by African-American Loyalists seeking Liberty, Justice, and Beauty, Whylah Falls is a village in Jarvis County, Nova Scotia. Wrecked by country blues and warped by constant tears, it is a snowy, northern Mississippi, with blood spattered, not on magnolias, but on pines, lilacs, and wild roses.

Whylah Falls, George Elliott Clarke (1990)

You may leave and go to Halimuhfack
But my slowdrag will bring you back.
Well you may go
but this will bring you back.

“Halimuhfack,” Zora Neale Hurston (1939)

Turning North

In what is now considered a call to arms that bolstered the development of the New Southern Studies, Houston Baker and Dana Nelson argued that to understand the racial, political, socio-economic, and cultural distinctions of “The South” it is necessary to “construct and survey a new scholarly map” of where and what that space might be. In their 2001 preface for a special

issue of *American Literature*, they concluded that “we are always already in ‘The South,’ that it is unequivocally and intricately lodged in us” (243). They built their argument from Malcom X’s claim that “Mississippi” is “anywhere in the United States south of the Canadian border” (231). Baker and Nelson’s call, along with that of Malcolm X, wants to collapse what Leigh Anne Duck later elucidates in 2006 as the “conflict between southern conservatism and national democracy,” therefore shortening the distance between a perceived “backward South” and an “enlightened nation” (Duck *The Nation’s Region* 3) where, to borrow one of William Faulkner’s aphorisms, “to understand the world, you must first understand a place like Mississippi.” While Baker and Nelson stimulated a renewed interest in critically understanding the US South as it explains the nation, they also adopted the perspective of an American “we,” that is exceptional in its racial oppression, disciplinary violence, and cultural elision of the nation’s “others.” They relied on Malcom X’s map where racial oppression and black suppression ends at the Canada-US border.

In a recent and timely issue of *The Global South*, the contributors consider the “South in the North,” which, as the guest editor Jon Smith put it, “did not turn out as planned” (5). The title of this special issue suggests that the US South can be found north of the Canada-US border, and the issue should act as a necessary revision of both Malcolm X’s and Baker and Nelson’s maps of the South. As the issue proceeds, it becomes clear that the contributors are uninterested in reifying the myth of American exceptionalism—even if America is exceptionally good at inflicting oppression and racial terror—and how that defines a northern Canadian model. Instead, they consider how their disciplinary approaches trace “the geographic pathways and demarcations through which power has historically operated, with continuing and often devastating variations and effects.” The contributors “seek to disrupt the spatial imaginaries that have both underpinned and emerged from those geopolitical relations” (Duck “Preface” 1). Duck

reorients the special issue's original "plan," as Smith would have it, and asks readers to consider the *global* south over the US South as a viable critical position from which to discuss the similarities, and differences, amongst North American systems of rule. When thinking of "souths" instead of "the South," it is helpful to consider any "south" as an "orientation," something that exists in relation to a perceived North (Dainotto 44). Power and capital are inequitably distributed between these two poles, which exist not simply between nations but within the North American subject as well. While the US South is not replicated in Canada, the way in which the latter nation inscribes racial oppression and division, combined with a significant history of western empire and colonialism reproduces a painfully familiar white supremacist settler state.

It is perhaps not surprising that Canadian critics have considered the damages Malcolm X's claim wrought on the "abjected Regional other[s]" from North of the Canada-US border who do not have a "Mississippi" to locate as the bugbear of their oppression (Baker and Nelson 236). Jade Ferguson explains how Malcolm X "reiterated the *myth of Canada* as a racially progressive and tolerant nation, removed from the plague of racism that had spread uncontrollably throughout the United States" (125, emphasis added). This "myth of Canada" is the international conception that the country is free of a history of slavery and racial oppression; that the country to the North of the US got democracy and racial equity right with its legislated move to Multiculturalism in 1971 and its eventual passing of the Canadian Multiculturalism Act in 1988. Even before these federally legislated mandates, which have been criticized as a "gentle and insidious form of cultural apartheid" (Bissoondath 82), Canada had been idealized as the site of escape for enslaved African Americans. In a 1967 Massey Lecture, Martin Luther King Jr. compared Canada to the "North Star" and to the "heaven" in Negro spirituals, where "the Negro

sang of the hope that his escape on the underground railroad would carry him there” (1).⁶¹

Canada had been conceived as a site of escape in the early African American imagination. It is the fairytale happy ending, but, much like a Disney movie, we don’t find out what happens after that happy ending. Life does not stop after a wedding nor does the color of your skin change or white supremacist order end after crossing the Canada-US border.

What we do find across that border is a vibrant African Canadian population with a rich cultural identity indelibly linked to the history of Canada, the US, and the Black Atlantic. Perhaps one of the most surprising responses to Black Canada is that it is not black enough, that it doesn’t signify blackness in a way that locates it with respect to US blackness. With its proximity to the United States, black Canadian cultural experience is either subsumed by US blackness or not seen as holding any cultural value, as I will show in coded criticisms of the Canadian rapper and global superstar Drake. This chapter investigates how Canadian blackness has been compared to, and compares itself with, a US definition of blackness. It also interrogates how the Africadian (African-Acadian-Canadian) poet and critic George Elliott Clarke refuses to be subsumed within US blackness by engaging in a strategy of “resistive appropriation” of the blues idiom. Clarke’s poetry collections *Saltwater Spirituals and Deeper Blues* (1983) and *Whylah Falls* (1990) present black Nova Scotian identity as deeply rooted in the fishing towns and rocky bluffs by the sea *and* as searching for connections to, as well as departures from, US black cultural output. Clarke uses the blues as a narrative sleight of hand where the form signals Americanness but produces what he calls *African Canadianité*: the distinct regional and national elements of Black Canadian identity.

⁶¹ Created in 1961 in honor of Vincent Massey, the first Governor General of Canada, the Massey Lectures are an annual five-part lecture series that focus on culture, politics, or philosophy. Each year a notable scholar is invited to present. Some previous Massey Lecturers include Northrop Frye, Noam Chomsky, Margaret Atwood, and Thomas King.

As we saw in the previous chapter, blues music travels across cultural, ethnic, and national borders in ways that recognize the cultural production of African Americans while providing the specific cultural timbre of Indigenous writers. Jerry Wasserman, in his discussion of African-Canadian theatre and its incorporation of the blues aesthetic, argues that the blues can “speak beyond the borders of the land where they began, and they can speak with transformative power and effect” (“Whose Blues?” 39). As a creative aesthetic, the blues are highly adaptive to the cultural milieu in which they are set. Blues expressivity provides a means of interrogating the confluence of circumstance and space, where regional expressions of the moment become indicative of a global (black) American music. In the case of African Canadian theatre, Wasserman explains that “Black Canadians who write blues plays Africanadianize, or otherwise hybridize, American blues to speak to the particularities of black Canadian experience, which always shares a border with and a consciousness of black America and partakes of the broader diasporic poly-consciousness that characterizes AfriCanadiana, in theatre as in other forms” (42). Wasserman signifies on George Elliott Clarke’s notion of *African-Canadianité*, which “marks the hegemony of heterogeneity, an attribute that African Canadians share with other communities in Canada” (Clarke *Odysees* 48). Clarke does not deny the potency of *negritude* or black diasporic cultural production, but, instead, argues that there is a particular type of black Canadian nationalism that informs black Canadian identity.⁶² Further, Clarke explains that the “specific constraints of African-Canadian life—its heterogeneity, the scant population, its perpetual marginalization within white majority discourses—in a word, its African-Canadianité—means that the powerful African-American influence upon it must be adjusted.

⁶² *Negritude*, as an artistic aesthetic and intellectual movement, was established by the poets and intellectuals Aimé Césaire, Léon Damas, and Léon Sédar Senghor. They rejected assimilation to white European culture, disavowed colonial rule, and, instead, provide a black radical tradition that reached across the diaspora back to Africa. For more on Negritude, see Césaire’s *Discourse on Colonialism*, Damas’s *Mine de Rien*, and Senghor’s *The Collected Poetry*.

Canada is an American space that warps Americanité” (49). And, as we will see, Black Canada is a Black space that revises American and black diasporic influences into Canadian blackness.

While much of Clarke’s scholarly career has been devoted to recuperating and promoting African Canadian literature and literary history, his liberatory black politics have sought not just to resist assimilation by white euro-Canadian cultural ideals but also to resist and revise African American blackness and its influence on Black Canada. In the essay “Must All Blackness Be American? Locating Canada in Borden’s ‘Tightrope Time,’ or Nationalizing Gilroy’s *Black Atlantic*,” in his *Odysseys Home*, Clarke argues that a black “cultural nationalism” is the necessary “counterweight” to African America’s “*de facto* dictatorship of influence” on blackness across the diaspora (82). For Clarke, it is *African Canadianité* that provides the necessary distinction from a global sense of blackness. The subtleties of these national variations—be they Caribbean, British, American, West Indian, or Canadian—are found, according to Clarke, in the “lyricism of cultural difference, not the mere prose of cultural diversity” (83). This distinction between cultural difference and cultural diversity is also addressed by Sneja Gunew when she attempts to “hear and acknowledge the difference rather than attempting to equate it with known elements in more familiar epistemologies. To put it another way, it is the opposite of the old humanist assumption that all human experience is essentially the same” (20-1). The difference amongst black cultures is enough to assert nuanced distinctions amongst nationalized groups within the black diaspora, and these are worth acknowledging, if not celebrating.

Turning to blues lyrics and poetry, Clarke uses an established black American idiom to foreground black Canadian experience, including the pleasure of black Nova Scotian life and the terrors of being black in white-dominated Canada. This appropriative move is what Clarke

deems “resistive appropriation,” which uses African American cultural forms as well as literary genres and modes from across the literary canon for his own creative purposes (*Odysseys* 83). Clarke’s use of resistive appropriation, “at the intersection of multiple and competing discourses and constructions of blackness,” produces “a new alternative Africadian voice that emerges as a counternarrative to the long-dominant, supremacist, patriarchal metanarrative of white civility” (Fraile-Marcos 126). The blues, understood here as a globally recognized African American idiom, for Clarke, can be manipulated to promote the working-class black voices of Nova Scotia, highlighting the cultural difference amongst black diasporic peoples as well as promoting a black Canadian experience that has so often been elided in Canada and across the Black Atlantic.

To articulate these complex layers of black Canadian experience and how Clarke uses the blues to express an Africadian presence, this chapter begins by interrogating how black Canadian experience has been erased by (African) American literature. I then discuss the complex ways black Canadians create their identity not always in relation to Canada but across the Black Atlantic. With a renewed understanding of black Canadian identity, I turn to Clarke to read his use of blues and African American cultural forms to express his *African Canadianité*. Finally, as a means of understanding the larger cultural implications of black diasporic appropriation, this chapter ends on a discussion of the global rap phenomenon Drake and how he must balance his *African Canadianité* with his global sound.

Black Canada Erased

Ishmael Reed’s 1976 novel, *Flight to Canada*, is a wild satirical reimagining of the US Civil War. The text, a neo-slave narrative, focuses on two enslaved black characters: Uncle Robin, the head domestic, who writes himself into his master Arthur Swille’s will, and the

fugitive Raven Quickskill, who makes his way to Canada through the writing of his poem, “Flight to Canada.”⁶³ Quickskill’s poem prefaces the novel and explains the origins of his escape while reifying the myth of Canada as a black fugitive’s Canaan. Amongst the braggadocio and the wry and sexual humor, Quickskill writes that he is “safe in the arms / of Canada” (3) and that it may be “cold up here” in “Saskatchewan Brrrrrr!,” “but least / Nobody is collaring hobbling gagging / Handcuffing yoking chaining & thumbscrewing / You like you is they hobby horse” (4). Much as in Quickskill’s poem, Canada is considered to be more of a mythic than a geographical destination throughout the novel. At one point, the overseer, Cato the Graffado, explains to Master Swille that the “part about Canada is just done to throw you off his trail. That nigger ain’t in no Canada. There ain’t no such place; that’s just reactionary mysticism” (52). Balancing an understanding that Canada is the ultimate goal of his striving with a knowledge that a place free of structural racism can’t possibly exist, Quickskill, within the heritage of fugitive slave writers, turned to his writing as a site of escape and resistance: “[I]t was his writing that got him to Canada. ‘Flight to Canada’ was responsible for getting him to Canada. And so for him, freedom was his writing. His writing was his HooDoo . . . It fascinated him, it possessed him; his typewriter was his drum he danced to” (88-9).⁶⁴ By acknowledging that Canada is both a geographical space and an imagined state of being, Quickskill “preferred Canada to slavery, whether Canada was exile, death, art, liberation, or a woman. Each man to his own Canada” (88).

The myth of Canada as a black safe haven is quickly demystified once Raven crosses to Niagara, Ontario. There he meets a free friend, Carpenter, who has been beaten by “some mobocrats” after he was denied access to a hotel room (159). Quickskill responds:

⁶³ The term “neo-slave narrative” was popularized by Ashraf H. A. Rushdy in his *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form*.

⁶⁴ This rhetorical move of writing one’s freedom is the “trope of the talking book.” For more on this, see Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Criticism* (1988).

“I don’t understand, Carpenter. Why, outside it looks like the Peaceable Kingdom.”

“Maybe here but not elsewhere. Man, as soon as you reach the metropolitan areas you run into Ford, Sears, Holiday Inn, and all the rest.”

“You’re kiddin,” Quickskill said. “You have to be kiddin.”

“Cross my heart and hope to die.”

“But what about St. Catherine’s? William Wells Brown told me that he’d gotten a number of slaves across to St. Catherine’s, where they found rewarding careers.”

“Let me show you downtown St. Catherine’s,” Carpenter said, removing a photo from his wallet. It looked like any American strip near any American airport; it could have been downtown San Mateo. Neon signs with the customary banners, coffee joints where you had to stand up and take your java from wax cups.

“It looks so aesthetically unsatisfying.”

“You can say that again, Quaw Quaw,” Quickskill said.

“Man, they got a group up here called the Western Guard, make the Klan look like statesmen. Vigilantes harass fugitive slaves, and the slaves have to send their children to schools where their presence is subject to catcalls and harassment. Don’t go any farther, especially with her [Quaw Quaw]. They beat up Chinamen and Pakistani in the streets. West Indians they shoot.” (160)

A little later on, Carpenter offers different facts and figures to show that “Americans own Canada. They just permit Canadians to operate it for them” (161).

This lengthy quotation depicts both how Canada is not the post-racial paradise it was thought to be and how poorly the American imagination perceives Canada. Despite being

separated simply by a border, an arbitrary line drawn across the 49th parallel, Americans expect Canada to be somehow distinct from the US, that it should be wholly unrecognizable in its difference. Quickskill and Carpenter's disappointment is more indicative of their own misconceptions than it is of Canada's being simply an extension of the United States. Although Reed's novel is set during the US Civil War, its use of time is a textbook example of postmodern historicity, where time is played with in such a way that the Canada Reed provides represented by American capitalistic imperialisms (the prevalence of Sears, Ford, and Holiday Inn); a small and failed Canadian fascist group from the late 1960's (The Western Guard Party), who rose in response to the new progressive liberalism of the recently elected Prime Minister, Pierre Trudeau; and the mythical dominion that enslaved Africans dreamed of and escaped to during the antebellum period.

What is most telling about Reed's representation of the failings of the myth of Canada, is that he doesn't investigate—nor does he have his characters investigate—the spaces where diverse ethnicities live and thrive in the country. More simply stated, Quickskill doesn't encounter any black Canadians. If we reverse the arguments set forward by Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark*, then Reed is *reveling in the white*. By this I mean, we learn much more about Reed's blindness or artistic silences concerning black experience in Canada in this passage than we do about Canadian race relations. He is, instead, so preoccupied with the intricacies of capitalism and white supremacy, which he presents as American cultural products, that he cannot see past the shining white monuments—in his case, box stores, car companies, and fascist groups. Reed is unable to see the dark spaces, the shadows, that darken and expand Canadian identity and race relations. In his attempt to deconstruct the myth that Canada is a multicultural “peaceable kingdom,” Reed erases black Canada.

Black Canadian culture and art have not only been erased rather than adequately represented in works by (African) American authors, they have also been elided from conversations about the Black Atlantic. In his 2015 *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered: Black Canadian Writing, Cultural History, and the Presence of the Past*, Winfried Siemerling “hope[s]” his text “demonstrate[s] that accounts and genealogies of the black Atlantic also need to be routed through the times and spaces of what is now Canada” (30). It might come as a surprise that a recent monograph is so singularly invested in remapping the Black Atlantic and its discursive routes through the black-settled and scarred spaces of French and English Canada. The surprise lies in the erasure of black Canadian culture as both black—relating to a larger diasporic group—and as Canadian within the discourse of the black Diaspora. Siemerling explains that much of his critical effort is to increase the “visibility of black Canadian writing in national, North American, transatlantic, and hemispheric terms” (4). Siemerling’s work makes room for black Canadian writing through a set of increasingly expansive spatial modes of inquiry because black Canadian writing has been so readily dismissed or read outside of a critical black Canadian framework. Black Canada has been moved to the periphery nationally and internationally; histories of black loyalists, enslavement, migration, and citizenship have been occluded from a (white) national history.

This doubled erasure of black Canadian cultural output as *black* and *Canadian*—including art, music, film, as well as literature—has stimulated much-needed Canadian critical discourse. Rinaldo Walcott, David Chariandry, Jade Ferguson, George Elliot Clarke, Marcel Trudel, and Afua Cooper have helped dispel Canada’s international image as a multicultural haven by uncovering the history of slavery and structural racism at home. Their work also presents a vibrant discourse focused on black Canada, where the turbulent history of North

American black experience does not simply end with the underground railroad or mimic the map drawn by Malcolm X.⁶⁵

The struggle, though, for black Canadians and scholars of black Canadian literature and culture is to discern how blackness informs Canadianness and how Canadianness informs their particular brand of blackness. This might recall Spivak's "strategic essentialism," allowing black Canada to essentialize its culture and community and create a cohesive identity. However, creating a homogenous black Canadian identity is not so simple, because, according to George Elliott Clarke, black Canadians do not live in a Du Boisian "double-consciousness" where one tries to reconcile being both black and American, but in a "poly-consciousness" where one feels "divided severally . . . not just 'black' and Canadian, but also adherents to a region, speakers of an 'official' language (either English or French), disciples of heterogeneous faiths, and related to a particular ethnicity (or 'national' group)" (*Odysseys* 40). In Canada, there is no monolithic national black identity with a history akin to that of African Americans, where an overt system of apartheid called for black unity and the resistive creation of a black identity that we saw in the Harlem Renaissance, as outlined by Kenneth Warren and discussed in the first chapter of this dissertation. Black Canadians are asked to consider their blackness in relation to their neighbors to the south as well as diasporic blackness in various other parts of the Black Atlantic. A majority of contemporary black Canadian authors interrogate their own connections to the black diaspora as well as the ways they are influenced by, and reject, Canada as nation-state. Many

⁶⁵ For more on the work done by these critics, see Rinaldo Walcott's *Black Like Who? Writing Black Canada* (1997); David Chariandry's "'The Fiction of Belonging': On Second-Generation Black Writing in Canada," "'Canada in Us Now': Locating the Criticism of Black Canadian Writing," and "'Against the South': The Mississippi of Black Writing in Canada;" Jade Ferguson's "'This is our Alabama': Racial Segregation, Discrimination, and Violence in Tamio Wakyama's *Signs of Life*;" George Elliott Clarke's *Odysseys Home: Mapping African-Canadian Literature* (2002); Marcel Trudel's *L'esclavage au Canada français: histoire et conditions de l'esclavage* (1960); and Afua Cooper's *The Hanging of Angelique: The Untold Story of Canadian Slavery and the Burning of Old Montreal* (2007).

black Canadians are migrants or descendants of migrants from the Caribbean. Dionne Brand, for example, writes about the ruptures in black diasporic conceptions of origin and identity in her *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* (2001). Canada is part of her identity, but her position as a black diasporic subject asks that she consider how migration, enslavement, intergenerational traumas, and epistemological silences have shaped her identity.

In his influential *Black Like Who? Writing Black Canada* (1997), Rinaldo Walcott argues that writing blackness is a “scary scenario,” because black Canadians are “an absented presence always under erasure. Located between the US and the Caribbean, Canadian blackness is a bubbling brew of desires for elsewhere, disappointments in the nation, and the pleasures of exile even for those who have resided here for many generations” (41-2). This desire for elsewhere, within a black diasporic lens, is a physical and epistemological yearning. Black Canadians who can map their genealogy to the black Loyalists do not find their history readily apparent in the narrative of pre-Confederation Canada, nor do Caribbean migrants and their descendants consider Canada as a rooted “home,” but view it instead, as a stop on a migratory route. These erasures by and rejections of Canada as home are representative of the precarity thrust upon black diasporic people living in the wake of the transatlantic slave trade.⁶⁶ The cycles of movement and homelessness coupled with gaps in cultural and traditional knowledge are the fallout of crossing Dionne Brand’s “Door of No Return,” both a physical and symbolic threshold that was forcibly crossed by enslaved Africans as they were thrust into the new world.⁶⁷ Brand suggests that a black diasporic life is one that must recognize the ruptures between home,

⁶⁶ See Christina Sharpe’s *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016) for her extraordinary argument concerning black precarity and how the history of slavery—what she calls living in the wake—has scarred and followed black diasporic people into our contemporary moment.

⁶⁷ Physical Doors of No Return can be found along the African Atlantic coast in established slave exportation centers. A Door of No Return is the final threshold crossed by newly enslaved Africans as they leave Africa for the New World.

origins, and ways of knowing that can never be recovered. Black diasporic life, in this light, is marked by the original erasure of slavery—from subject to object. Black Canadians live in the wake of that first elision and are left to connect their blackness with White Canada as well as the US and the Caribbean.

Centering black Canada and its cultural production must work against the unrooted nature of black diasporic people, national erasure, *and* erasure internationally, including by other black people. George Elliott Clarke frames this problem from a black Canadian perspective: “For African Canadians can never escape the situation of their blackness, whatever their adherence to potent, transnational Afrocentrisms, within the Canadian contexts of regional, ethnic, and linguistic ‘Balkanization’ and the perpetual erasure of their cultures from the public sphere.” Clarke adds that black Canadians struggle with looking southwards because, “despite its indisputable beauty, Black America offers no easy refuge, for it addresses African-Canadian culture with attitudes of either hegemonic dismissal or peremptory annexation” (*Odysseys Home* 28). The allure of looking southwards to the United States, for black Canadians, is a historically rich, culturally affirmed—“for the culture”—seemingly homogenous black identity. Black America, Clarke avers, functions as a “model blackness, a way of conceiving and organizing African-Canadian existence” (28). Black Canadian identity, then, is in constant conversation with black American culture, attesting to and resisting an “Americocentricity,” while also attempting to balance the numerous other regional, national, and cultural elements that make up a poly-conscious Canadian blackness (Gilroy *Black Atlantic* 191).

Flight to Canada

In the “Preface” to *Whylah Falls* (2000), George Elliott Clarke locates his fictional village of the same name in “Jarvis County, Nova Scotia,” and describes it as “[w]recked by country blues and warped by constant tears.” Whylah Falls is a “snowy, northern Mississippi, with blood spattered, not on magnolias, but on pines, lilacs, and wild roses” (xxvii). In his lyric novel, or narrative poetry collection—a text that is organized as a narrative while consisting of a collection of poems—Clarke redraws Malcom X’s map and claims that Mississippi is, in fact, located on the Canadian side of the Canada-US border, and with it comes the “country blues.” However, Whylah Falls is also decidedly not Mississippi: It was “[f]ounded in 1783 by African-American Loyalists seeking Liberty, Justice, and Beauty” (xxvii). Clarke’s Africadian town in Nova Scotia demands, by its very existence, that the borders demarcating racialized black experience be redrawn. David Chariandry, himself an African Canadian writer and scholar, argues that Clarke and Malcolm provide “two discrepant understandings of black ‘border work’” where US black experience is seen as either national or diasporic (“Against the South” 63). Chariandry goes on to argue that the invocation of “Mississippi” in African Canadian literature is not distinct to Clarke, and, instead, it is a trope that serves three objectives: “first, to assert a broader or ‘unified’ New World black experience; second, to distinguish the political, cultural, and affective landscapes of Canada regarding anti-black racism; and third, to contest the myth of a color blind or ‘post-racial’ Canada” (67). Said another way, black Canadian invocations of Mississippi assert a black Canadian presence in the black Atlantic, claim a racialized black Canadian experience as *black*, and deconstruct the myth of Canada as a multicultural “peaceable kingdom.” Clarke’s *Whylah Falls* fulfills all three criteria, but it also resists African American

blackness within a hierarchical model by rerouting and redefining US black cultural production through the Atlantic Canadian terrain.

Clarke's *Whylah Falls* is a narrative poetic text separated into seven sections detailing the lives of the residents of the black-settled town, Whylah Falls, during the Great Depression. In the tenth anniversary edition, Clarke added a lengthy introduction and an eighth section "The Apocrypha," which provides brief snapshots of the characters' lives after the events of the previous seven sections.⁶⁸ The text resists easy definition as a poetry collection, novel, or even drama (Clarke would later turn the text into a play by the same name, which premiered in 1999).⁶⁹ The text begins with a "Preface," an "Admission," a list of "Dramatis Personae," and the poem "Look Homeward, Exile." These almost paratextual elements provide necessary context about the text itself, set the scene for the narrative, and list the cast of characters, all while playfully pushing the boundaries of what we might expect from a single collection of poetry. The sections each begin with a poem entitled "The Argument," which functions as a prologue. The narrative details the sexual immaturity of Xavier Zachary, the young poet who returned to Whylah Falls from his exile at University, and his courting of Shelley Clemence; Saul Clemence's near-incestuous affair with his stepdaughter, Missy Jarvis; the heartbreak of Saul's wife Cora Clemence; the erotic and passionate love affair between Pablo Gabriel, the foreign musician, and Amarantha Clemence; the sermon delivered by Reverend F. R. Langford about the value and necessity of love; and, the murder of Othello Clemence, the Nova Scotian blues guitarist, by a jealous lover who duped S. Scratch Seville into committing the crime. The

⁶⁸ I am using the 10th anniversary edition for my analysis of Clarke's *Whylah Falls* (2000). The first edition was published in 1990.

⁶⁹ H. Nigel Thomas explains that "Clarke says that when he reads for high school students he tells them that *Whylah Falls* is a novel written in poetry" (2). The texts' form is intentionally difficult to define, because it is more interested in the potential of form than it is in the restrictions of genre.

text is an amalgamation of poetic forms, including free verse, Romantic lyrics, haiku, and vernacular-based poems. It also includes a recipe for rose vinegar, newspaper articles, letters, and photographs. Clarke's text works along similar terrain as Sherwood Anderson's modernist classic *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), Edgar Lee Masters's *Spoon River Anthology* (1915), and Margaret Laurence's evocation of Manawaka, Manitoba in her *A Bird in the House* (1970), where the central figure is the town itself.

In the "Introduction to the Tenth Anniversary Edition" of *Whylah Falls*, Clarke provides a slippery authorial persona who connects the blues to the genesis of his text. He claims that *Whylah Falls* was "born in the blues, the philosophy of the *cry*," where he was "trying to find the emotion of song, to rediscover the Four Muses—Eros, Death, Intellect and Spirit" (xi, emphasis in original). Clarke establishes that the blues, for him, are part of a classical form of expression that taps into the complications of human experience and interaction. He continues: "I attempted to worry the line, each verse line, like a blues guitarist using a piece of glass to alter notes. You see, you have to understand improvisation, how a standard reference can become something else" (xi). Here, Clarke focuses on the importance of signification and improvisation within black diasporic culture, where signifying is "a metaphor for textual revision" (Gates 96). To "worry the line," explains Sherley Anne Williams in her essay "The Blues Roots of Contemporary Afro-American Poetry" (1979), "includes changes in stress and pitch, the addition of exclamatory phrases, changes in word order, repetition of phrases within the line itself, and the wordless blues cries that often punctuate the performance of the songs." Cheryl Wall, in her *Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition* (2005), uses worrying the line as a metaphor for lineage and participation in a literary tradition (8). For Clarke, then, worrying the line in his work asks that he be read within the blues' literary tradition

and to see the ways in which he improvises and signifies on, and departs from, the blues as form to produce something recognizable and Africadian.

A large part of Clarke's creative project in *Whylah Falls* is to create a mythical poetic space filled with a lost black Nova Scotian community. He explains that he attempted to "fathom the soul of the village of verse by painting a canvas with black watercolor (bone charcoal), permitting it to dry, and then daubing the bottom border with rainbow pastel flowers that gangled upon luminous green stems. This Creation gleamed under a single loony-sized chalk moon" (xvii-xviii).⁷⁰ Clarke's artistic creation is focused on black Canadian experience, balancing both the rich rural culture and the difficult life found on the Northwest Atlantic coast. On top of his attempt to create the pastoral space of Whylah Falls, complete with representation of black Nova Scotian life, Clarke's text is a cornucopia of "all those beautiful, abandoned, thematic forms that resembled broken organs, rusted trumpets, warped guitars" that "were still capable of the most unearthly music." He goes on to list them alphabetically:

Hence, I accepted the alba, the aphorism, the aubade, the ballad, *the blues*, the chanson, the colophon, the coronach, the distich, the elegy, the envoy, the epistle, the fable, the georgic, the hydrographic, the idyll, the *jeu d'esprit*, the kenning, the lamentation, the madrigal, the moody, the nomination, the oration, the plaint, the proem, the querimonic, the rococo, the shanty, the sonnet, the threnody, the unreliable narrator, the vatic, the wonder, the xxxotic, the yowl, and the zeugma. (xviii emphasis added)

Clarke's exuberant inclusion of various thematic and generic forms in hindsight belies the importance of the blues in the text as formal and aesthetic elements. Mixing recognizable literary genres and modes with the more fanciful and organic (the xxxotic, the yowl), Clarke calls to

⁷⁰ A "loony-sized chalk moon" is a reference to the Canadian one-dollar coin which has the image of a loon, a water bird, on one side. It is a nationwide colloquialism to call the dollar coin a "loony."

attention his ability to combine these varying elements to create a cohesive whole. There is a rhythm to his playful list where he reminds the reader that the narrator can be unreliable despite all of his elucidating the impetuses behind his text.

Clarke's improvisation on multiple forms marks a confluence and mastery of form that invokes African Canada's relationship with Canada, blackness, and place. He writes how influential African American music had been for him. He "experienced the liberatory phenomenon of African-American song disrupting standard literary discourse like blaring horns. Every poem, attempting to trace the genealogy of love, kept referring, no, deferring to the canon of James Brown, Otis Redding, Aretha Franklin, Diana Ross, Smokey Robinson, Billie Holiday, and Bessie Smith." While Clarke recognizes the potency of African American musical expression, he also signifies on the histories of the black diaspora, privileging black "sung literature, that is, *orature*" over Western literary canons that have silenced black voices and experience. He focuses on the importance of black voices in dialogue. He "studied the discipline of gossip and yarns, noting that such tales form the matrix of myth" (xviii). A turn to the vernacular where a "matrix of myth" can take form signifies on Houston Baker's *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (1984), where the blues are conceived both as the expressive force of a black vernacular tradition and as a matrix that provides a means of translating the inherent ironies, histories, mythologies, and "peculiar experiences of Africans in the New World" (5).

Clarke turns to the vernacular to create an Africadian mythology—world- and nation-building through a recorded fictionalized history—on one hand, and to more readily access his African Canadian community more readily, on the other. In the spring of 1986 at the Black Cultural Centre of Nova Scotia, Clarke had a "horrible experience" while reading his poetry for

the black members of his community. Clarke recounts how he read his poetry like he “had been taught to . . . in the university, which is very formal and very Atwood-like in terms of being very plain, no emotion, just straightforward recitation.” He remembers: “Some people started yelling at me: ‘Get off the stage.’ It was very direct: ‘You’re boring. Go home.’ The people didn’t want to hear some dry shit” (qtd. in Compton 145). Clarke had been reading from his first collection of poetry, *Saltwater Spirituals and Deeper Blues* (1983), which he felt was material that “hadn’t yet been transmuted into [his] own voice.” Clarke was “writing the poetry [he] thought [he] should be writing as opposed to stuff [he] had to write” (146). He recovered by reading an early poem from *Whylah Falls*, “Love Letter to an African Woman,” where he received a “rich” and “intense” response to his poetic call. This moment led him to understand that his poetry has a political requirement that demands he speak not necessarily for, but *to*, African Canada: “I said to myself, I will never write again anything I cannot read before my own community” (146). It is with a black Canadian audience in mind that Clarke inverts Houston Baker’s theoretical approach. Rather than envisioning the blues as an expression of black American vernacular experience, Clarke, instead, uses blues as a means to access Africadian vernacular spaces.

In his first collection of poetry, *Saltwater Spirituals and Deeper Blues*, Clarke memorializes black experience and isolation in Nova Scotia, Canada. The collection is separated into three sections that strongly evoke African American vernacular traditions: “Soul Songs,” “Blues Notes,” and “The Book of Jubilee.” After each section, Clarke provides photos of African Canadian churches, school houses, and people (typically of fishermen, dock workers, preachers, domestic workers, and school children) either posing for pictures or at work. His titles for the collection and the sections signify a connection to well-established African American traditions. “Soul Songs” signify on W.E.B. Dubois’s “Sorrow Songs,” found in his influential *The Souls of*

Black Folk, “Blues Notes” asks us to consider this section as a part of the blues literary tradition, and the final section, “The Book of Jubilee,” signifies on a moment of emancipation through religion.

However, Clarke’s text isn’t simply a facsimile or a polite adaptation of African American culture. He positions himself, at times, as nationless and as part of an African-American cosmopolitan tradition in the manner of Richard Wright, Bessie Smith, and Ma Rainey (all American born and named in his poem “Watercolour for Negro Expatriates in France”). But he also adds a specificity to his own personal experience of being black in Atlantic Canada by naming markers that are distinct to his region and providing photographs as a sort of ocular proof. Each poem in the “Soul Songs” section is named for a black Canadian church within the settlement of Africville, an all-black community established by freedmen and black loyalists during the American Revolution, and later inhabited by escaped slaves from the war of 1812. Africville was later destroyed by Halifax’s urban renewal plans in the 1960s. His “Book of Jubilee” section creates an epic poetic narrative around Richard Preston’s establishment of the African Baptist Association in 1854 and ends on Clarke’s own genealogical connection to the Canadian Black church in his final poem “Christ Church.”

Clarke positions his cultural identity amidst a complex network of black historical experience in North America that encompasses Black Atlantic, African Canadian, and African American elements. Nova Scotia, the setting for *Saltwater Spirituals and Deeper Blues* is a site of layered colonial histories. At one point, it held Port Royal, capital of the Acadian homeland of the contemporary Cajuns of the US South before they were displaced by the Acadian diaspora. It was also a site of escape for British loyalists during the American Revolution. This colonial site of French and English empires was also part of the transatlantic slave trade. Between

enslavement under the French and British and a desire to escape slavery in the recently united States, the newly landed Africans and their descendants have a familiar experiential trajectory in the New World.

Whylah Falls, however, depicts a fictionalized black community in Atlantic Canada. Susan Willis, in her essay “Anansi History: George Elliott Clarke’s *Whylah Falls*,” compares Clarke’s village to “the Bottom” in Toni Morrison’s *Sula*. Willis argues that Clarke’s *Whylah Falls*, with its “links to other authors and their texts” produces a “literary map that mimics New World diasporic geographies” (49). It might be worth considering other black fictionalized spaces along with *Whylah Falls* and the Bottom, like the Muck in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Bois Sauvage in Jesmyn Ward’s novels. These spaces offer an intimate look into black relationships without direct white influence. They also, however, show the potential danger found in black/white interactions when black subjects leave the safety of those spaces, spaces can only exist due to legal or social segregation.⁷¹ Willis argues that “Nova Scotia is [a] crossroads” where various cultures are translated under the “matrix of the African-American literary tradition” (49). “*Whylah Falls*,” she adds, “is both the particular and the entirety of African-American memory” (49). Willis is half right. *Whylah Falls* does work as a crossroads, or a junction, where myriad cultural expressions and forms are reconfigured through the matrix of African-Canadian experience and spaces. However, claiming that *Whylah Falls* is representative of African-American memory discredits the cultural output and value of black Canada. Willis erases Clarke’s *African-Canadianité*. *Whylah Falls*, however, is a “new

⁷¹ Consider Janie Crawford’s run in with the judicial system after she shot Teacake for her own survival in Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). In Ward’s *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017), Jojo is held at gunpoint by a white police officer despite the fact that he is only a thirteen year-old boy. The majority of the novel is centered around the ways white disciplinary systems—including police, the justice system, and Parchman Prison—maintain black precarity.

geography” that gives access to the ways in which global and local cultures meet and meld (Wells 71).

Further, Whylah Falls is a new *expressive* geography that translates a black Canadian history while it transfigures diasporic black cultural output into its own image. Clarke’s town “mythologizes a specific place (Weymouth Falls) and an event (the killing of Graham Cromwell), but it does even more than that. Under the pressures of events (the razing of Africville and Cromwell’s death), it reconceptualizes a people and a 200-year-old history in mythic terms” (Compton 139). Clarke’s black space shows the beauty of a black community despite the state of precarity it has been forced into. The real Africville had been historically marginalized. Located just north of Halifax, the community paid taxes to the city but did not receive any services in return, including “paved roads, running water or sewers” (Africville). In 1854, 1912, and the 1940s, railways were built through the town on land expropriated by the city and the rail companies. Into the twentieth century residents were denied municipal services such as “public transportation, garbage collection, recreational facilities, and adequate police protection” (Africville).

In her essay “Africville, an Imagined Community,” Maureen Moynagh explains that the town was “rendered marginal by virtue of being a black community in a society dominated by white socio-economic interests” (19).⁷² Africville fell victim to the white organizing logic that was set on defining the space as industrialized land devoid of human inhabitants. The municipal government, along with commercial interests, reordered the space to include: “a fertilizer plant,

⁷² I highly recommend Moynagh’s article for her insightful explanation of the turn African Canadians authors make to reconstruct and mythologize Africville in their work. Her analysis shows how the multitudes of Africvilles, in representation, “serve as a symbolic armature for subjective identification against hegemonic constructions of blackness in the province, and as a distinctive conceptual framework for an emergent literary and cultural corpus” (31).

slaughterhouses, Rockhead Prison (1854), the ‘night-soil disposal pits’ (human waste) and the Infectious Diseases Hospital (1870s)” (Africville). By 1915, the Halifax City Council declared that Africville “will always be an industrial district” (qtd. in Africville). Moynagh explains that the industrial markers of “the city’s imaginary geography competed with the houses, the church, the school, and the community map-making which resolutely proclaimed Africville a residential neighborhood” (19). In the 1950s, Halifax built an open-pit garbage dump 350 meters (about 380 yards) from the western border of Africville. This allowed Halifax residents to conclude that Africville was a slum built around the dump, and it had become a “social problem in which the city was obliged to intervene paternally” (Moynagh 19). The members of the town were forcibly relocated. Their homes were destroyed—sometimes before they were able to collect their belongings—and the community was scattered. Michelle Banks explains that “in the general formula of urban renewal, the economic and aesthetic values of places are increased by land development, not by community development” (58). The concept of “urban renewal” champions the revitalization of spaces thought to have gone to waste by increasing the land’s value for cities like Halifax while erasing vibrant local communities.

For the reader to witness the vibrancy of Whylah Falls first hand, Clarke introduces the town through the perspective of Xavier Zachary. Referred to throughout as X, Zachary returns to the town from his exile at university. X describes Whylah Falls as a working-class community that is enriched by music and religion. He recalls the “soil crimsoned by butchered / Hog and imbrued with rye, lye, and homely / Spirituals everybody must know” (xxx). The Great Depression has taken its toll on the town as the “tyrant sun . . . charred the idiot crops” (xxx). Despite the increased vulnerability of the residents brought on by global economic collapse:

. . . *Beauty* survived secreted

In freight trains snorting in their pens, in babes

Whose faces were coal-black mirrors, in strange

Strummers who plucked Ghanaian banjos, hummed

Blind blues—precise, ornate, rich needlepoint,

In sermons scorched with Sulphur and brimstone,

And in my love's dark, orient skin that smelled

Like orange peels and tasted like rum, good God! (xxx-xxxi, emphasis added)

For X, what makes Whylah Falls beautiful, but also a place where *Beauty* has found sanctuary, is the halting of industrial encroachment symbolized by the somnolent freight trains, the growing black community, the rich cultural mixture of black diasporic experience that creates the soundscape of the town, the entrenched religious culture, and the smell and touch of his beloved—a space that provides the potential for erotic love. Clarke provides what Michelle Banks calls the “ideal Nova Scotian black community,” a space that balances the structural limitations of segregated black communities with the disparate elements of black Nova Scotian life that provides beauty and pleasure.

Clarke's inclusion of the “strummers who plucked Ghanaian banjos, hummed / Blind blues” routes Nova Scotia within the Black Atlantic. Susan Willis suggests that Clarke's poet is “already mapped into the genealogy of diaspora,” which is to say that Clarke's text is itself a black diasporic text. The identification of the banjo as Ghanaian disrupts the instrument's association with the US plantation, the history of minstrelsy, and the impoverished and isolated Appalachian whiteness as immortalized in James Dickey's *Deliverance* (1970) and its famous dueling banjo and guitar scene. Instead, Clarke positions the instrument as always already part of

the diaspora, following more closely the banjo's actual history. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* the name "banjo" is a black diasporic "corruption" of the Spanish or Portuguese "*bandore*, through African slave pronunciation" (etymology, Banjo). The dictionary's privileging of the white European root word over the improvisation and creative (de)formation of the term is itself a self-defensive gesture against the creolizing powers that created the word "banjo." The word exists because of white and black interaction and incomplete communication, where terms are misunderstood and appropriated to serve a communicable function.

The instrument, according to Dena J. Epstein, is the "most widely reported and longest lived of all the African instrument in the New World" (351) She explains that, under various iterations and spellings, the banjo "can be documented throughout the British and French West Indies and in the southern mainland colonies before 1800" (352).⁷³ Clarke's inclusion of this instrument from Ghana suggests that the banjo made its way directly from Africa to Nova Scotia, which asks the reader to consider the ways in which cultures combine and collide with, as well as corrupt, accepted histories and taken-for-granted transatlantic pathways. If this is the case for the Ghanaian banjo, then the accompaniment of a "hummed blind blues" asks the readers to consider how an established African-American form has made its ways to Nova Scotia. Have the blues come from the migration of African Americans from the US? Or is it born of the socio-political conflict of black and white interactions and miscommunications?

Whylah Falls uses blues as an already established idiom of the community. As X learns how to blend his university education with his black roots the audience bears witness to his creolization of classic and vernacular poetries. Early in the text, X writes a "negroid haiku":

⁷³ For more about the history of the Banjo, its black diasporic roots, and its adoption as a quintessentially "American" instrument see, Dena J Epstein's "The Folk Banjo: A Documentary History" (1975), Robert B. Winans' edited collection *Banjo Roots and Branches* (2018), and Richard Jones-Bamman's *Building New Banjos for an Old-Time World* (2017)—specifically chapter 1.

“I got a gal, sweet as sweet can be:

She walk through thunderin’ rain, just to be with me.” (14)

X’s poem echoes blues lyrics as it provides a *blackened* version of a classical style that had been met with serious interest by the modernist poet Ezra Pound. In his essay “Vorticism” (1915), Pound argues for the emotional impact of the “one image poem” for which he found inspiration in the Japanese haiku—typically a three-line poem with the first and third line consisting of five syllables and the second line seven syllables. X, within the timeframe of the narrative, would be a direct descendant of Pound’s modernism where the impetus to “make it new” provides X the necessary inspiration to blues up (re: blacken) established poetic modes.⁷⁴ X later exposes his poetic influences and includes himself within that literary genealogy: “After Howlin’ Will Shakespeare, Blind Jack Milton, and Missouri Tom Eliot, I’m just one more dreamer to hoist a guitar and strum Sixhiboux Delta Blues” (*Whylah Falls* 55). X’s renaming of his literary predecessors transforms canonical figures of the Western poetic tradition into monikered bluesmen. X’s signifying is also a revisionary act that considers Shakespeare, Milton, and Eliot within a black vernacular canon. He blackens them.

X’s return home is an educational experience that enriches his ability to communicate with the residents of Whylah Falls. He fails to woo Shelley because she can’t trust his poetic language or be sure that his love for her is real. She tells him, “Roses / got thorns. / And words / do lie” (25). X’s reliance on the poetic language that he learns in school marks him as apart from Whylah Falls in such a way that his sincerity and maturity are questioned. Shelley was right to rebuke X. When she leaves town, he turns to her sister, Selah, who tells X, “My gate’s open. /

⁷⁴ It is well worth reading Michael North’s *Guernica* essay, “The Making of ‘Make it New’” (2013), where he reminds readers that Pound didn’t include the phrase “make it new” into his writing until 1928, and that instead of being indicative of “modernist novelty” it is a phrase that is built upon, and suggests, historical recycling.

My fruits are pleasant. / Come and get a taste” (56). For X, this passionate and earthly affair with Selah returns him to his vernacular roots. He claims in “Monologue for Selah Bringing Spring to Whylah Falls”:

. . . My college speech ripens before you,
Becomes Negro-natural, those green, soiled words
Whose roots mingle with turnip, carrot, and squash,
Keeping philology fresh and tasty. (57)

Here X blends the pleasures of sex, the garden (the pastoral), and the vernacular to signal his rootedness to the space but also the importance of how “speaking” the same language opens lines of communication and garners access to the community. In the following poem, “To Selah,” X writes her a three stanza AAB blues poem within the tradition established by classic blues songs like Ma Rainey’s “See See Rider” (1924), Charlie Patton’s 1929 “Pony Blues,” Robert Johnson’s 1937 “Cross Road Blues,” or the blues poetry found in Hughes’ *The Weary Blues* (1926) and Sterling Brown’s *Southern Road* (1932). X worries the first two lines and provides a response, or a turn, in the last line for each stanza, recreating an internal antiphonal structure:

The butter moon is white
Sorta like your eyes;
The butter moon is bright, sugah,
Kinda like your eyes.
And it melts like I melt for you
While it coasts ‘cross the sky.

The black highway uncoils
Like your body do sometimes.
The long highway unwinds, mama,
Like your lovin’ do sometimes.
I’m gonna swerve your curves
And ride your centre line.

Stars are drippin’ like tears,
The highway moves like a hymn;

Stars are drippin' like tears, beau'ful,
The highway sways like a hymn.
And I reach for your love,
Like a burglar for a gem. (59)

Here, using the three-line AAB blues stanza with each line split into two—as established by Hughes—X creates a pastoral blues love song where the encroachment of modernity (the highway) is blended with the natural beauty of the Atlantic province. X displays his immaturity as a lover because he thinks that “love” is something to be stolen like a “gem” instead of something given within the boundaries of a mutually respectful relationship. The “love” X is looking for is purely carnal and erotic. H. Nigel Thomas argues that X’s metaphors “presage the failure of their relationship” because the “poem focuses on the visible, which after habitual looking soon loses its novelty” (10). Clarke thus focuses on X’s immaturity and reliance of superficial/visual metaphors to produce what Thomas calls a “courtship blues” (9).

Selah responds with her own song, “Blues for X,” where she rebukes his sexual immaturity and provides a necessary corrective that love, sex, and desire are simply not the same thing. She writes:

Pretty boy, towel your tears,
And robe yourself in black.
Pretty boy, dry your tears,
You know I’m comin’ back.
I’m your lavish lover
And I’m slavish in the sack.

Call me Sweet Potato,
Sweet Pea, or Sweety Pie,
There’s sugar on my lips
And honey in my thighs.
Jos’phine Baker bakes beans,
But I stew pigtails in rye.

My bones are guitar strings
And blues the chords you strum.
My bones are slender flutes

And blues the bars you hum.
You wanna stay my man,
Serve me whisky when I come. (63)

Selah's blues shows a sexual confidence and control that is absent in X's. She makes it clear that he won't be stealing anything from her, let alone her "love." Hazel V. Carby argues that blues women who "constructed themselves as sexual objects through song" assert an "empowered presence" (471-2). The "women's blues of the twenties and early thirties," Carby continues, "is a discourse that articulates a cultural and political struggle over sexual relations: a struggle that is directed against the objectification of female sexuality within a patriarchal order but which also tries to reclaim women's bodies as the sexual and sensuous subjects of women's song" (474). Selah's blues to X show her in control of her body and sexuality. So much so that she leaves X in tears wanting more. Selah's reference to Josephine Baker signals a female sexual bravado. Baker was a famous dancer in Paris during the Jazz Age, who was known for her scant outfit consisting of jewelry and a garter made from artificial bananas. Selah's sexuality and experience are earthier and harsher than Bakers, and, if X intends on keeping her satisfied, he needs to recognize that Selah is not the subject of his desire but the object of his lust.

The blues notes sounding in this section of *Whylah Falls* are the ways that men take advantage of women's bodies and approach them as something to be consumed. Clarke deploys the image of a "king bee" "hummin' from flower to flower" to signal X's lustful advances and lack of respect for women's bodies as he moves from one woman to the next. The poem "King Bee Blues" is a revision of Slim Harpo's 1952 "I'm a King Bee." Harpo's song uses the image of the king bee as a metaphor for his own sexual prowess and stature as an alpha male, which signals his desirability to the woman he pursues. Harpo is focused on a singular "queen," and he will wait until her "man is gone" so they can make honey that the "world ever never seen"

(Harpo). X's revision of Harpo's song uses the image of the "king bee" to show X as a philanderer in hot pursuit of any woman: "Women got good pollen; / [he] get some every hour" (*Whylah Falls* 51). X "stumbles upon Selah" and when "he kisses her, her clothes dissolve like cotton candy" (50). Selah's blues are found in her bearing the weight of the sins of the men who've loved her. She is a "modern martyr for love, bearing witness to its betrayal by men who fear their own nakedness. Thus, she has made alcohol her one true love. She has wedded liquor because men have betrayed her sexuality as they have betrayed their own" (49-50). Selah is always already a disposable body despite her sexual bravado because her body has been so readily consumed by her various lovers.

Although Clarke's text is built upon a blues aesthetic that champions vernacular voices and experiences—mostly the turbulent interactions between men and women—he does use the blues as a means to represent black precarity and the vulnerability of the black community and its members within a white supremacist state. This is particularly acute during the "Martyrdom of Othello Clemence" section, where Othello, Whylah Falls' local bluesman, is murdered by S. Scratch Seville wielding a shotgun. Jack Thomson, a Liberal Party politician whose race is never mentioned, had attempted to woo Othello's sister, Amarantha—with the potential for rape ("He swears he'll stallion this mare")—before Othello threatened to "bash" Jack's "false face" under the auspices of protective care for his sister (94). Jack, a known philanderer and Janus-faced politician, tells Seville, in Iago-like fashion, about his run-in with Othello. Seville tells Jack that "them Clemences ain't nothin' but coloured trouble" (110). Scratch confronts Cora, Othello and Amarantha's mother. She tells Scratch to get out of her house and calls his wife, Angel, a "whore and said [his] boy ain't [his]" (110). Othello then "lumbers in and suckers" Seville and threatens further attack if he is ever "shadowin' [their] doorway again" (111). Jack asks if Seville will let

“that scalawag shame” him and proceeds to laugh claiming that Othello has been “sniffing around your little pussy, Angel” (111). In fact, Jack is messing around with Angel. Jack manipulates Seville into murdering Othello by questioning his ability to keep his wife satisfied as well as his honor as a man.

While this type of power struggle amongst men over women is a common narrative trope with precedents in African American texts like Jean Toomer’s “Blood Burning Moon” (1923). Clarke’s story of Othello Clemence’s murder is also a condemnation of the Canadian media and a justice system that disregards black humanity. In Toomer’s story, Bob Stone, the son of a prominent white family, and Tom Burwell, a tough young black man, wish to claim Louisa, a young light-skinned black woman, for themselves. Bob sees Louisa as an object that he should be able to own like a “master” in the “days of slavery” (31). Tom is neither impressed by Bob Stone nor afraid of him. He tells Louisa that if Bob is “up t them tricks” of seducing and potentially raping Louisa, he will “cut him jes like a nigger” (30). Tom kills Bob in a knife fight over Louisa’s affections and is then lynched by an angry white mob. In his fearlessness towards white violence and terrorism, Tom fulfills the role of a “bad nigger” or of the badman archetype (32).

In his article “‘Shoot Myself a Cop’ Mamie Smith’s ‘Crazy Blues’ as Social Text,” Adam Gussow explains that the “badman hero . . . began as an ethical response to the desperate challenge posed to southern black male subjects in the 1890s by spectacle lynching, radical rhetoric (the ‘black beast rapist’), disenfranchisement,” and a biased and discriminatory “criminal justice system” (16). The badman resorts to violence as a response to those who’ve wronged him. In Mississippi John Hurt’s “Stack O’Lee,” Lee is a “cruel” “bad man” who, wielding a “big 45.,” “killed Billy de Lyon about a five-dollar Stetson hat.” Lee felt that Lyon

had cheated him while they were gambling and took matters into his own hands. Tom Burwell and Othello Clemence are “crazy” bad men because they are willing to “use violence against whites in defense of [their] person, family, and dignity, and in the face of deadly white reprisal that supposedly made such self-defense suicidal” (Gussow “Crazy Blues” 17). Tom Burwell is “coloured trouble” in similar fashion as Othello Clemence. Tom kills in the defense of Louisa and the preservation of his own masculinity and is met with white spectacle violence. Othello protects his mother and sister and is met by the wrathful violence of a man “dresse[d] wholly in white, including a white tie and gloves” who is but a pawn within the designs of Jack Thomson (Clarke *Whylah Falls* 101).

Clarke’s addition to the narrative of spectacle lynching is not simply the destruction of Othello’s body by shotgun blast—and we later learn by vicious stabbing—but also the public distortion of his character brought about by the media and an apathetic white controlled justice system. Clarke uses the metaphor of the shotgun blast and its echo as a refrain for the continuing violence done to black communities in the wake of the murders of black men. Much like the horses’ scream in Alexie’s *Reservation Blues* signaling the way historical violence carries on into the present, the shotgun blast ricochet is heard when Seville is “acquitted of the murder charge” and again when an “orchestra of typewriters performs *Otello* for two hundred thousand tabloids in three cities” (102). The blast leaves layers of destruction in its wake. Othello’s death is felt by X, by Shelley (“when I understood what happened to Othello, the air caught fire and the sun burnt black” [125]), and by Cora, who, in the aptly named “The Wake,” “stammers her pain in a white poem / Of rum more eloquent than speech” (116). The physical loss of Othello’s person is compounded by the silence of his absence. The shotgun that killed Othello “splutters loneliness.” Simultaneously Othello’s “guitar breaks, and twenty-four / Yellow butterflies flutter

free” (113). Here, in the wake of Othello’s murder, the town of Whylah Falls is met with loneliness and silence and left to mourn an important and dynamic member of the community.

Adding insult to injury, Clarke exposes the ways in which black death is minimized within the social imagination. The poem *cum* news article, “The Whylah Moon, Aug. 6, 19__” has the article “Seville Granted Bail” nestled amongst media ephemera. Here is the article in full:

SEVILLE GRANTED BAIL

By Biter Honey

HALIFAX – Bail has been granted to S. Scratch Seville, pending his trial on a charge of second degree murder in the June shotgun slaying of a 30-year-old man at Maillet, Jarvis County.

Mr. Justice Pious Cutthroat of the Nova Scotia Supreme Court rejected a Crown request to keep Seville, 40, in custody until he faces trial this autumn for allegedly killing Othello Clemence.

The Crown lawyer Fiskal Wyse

opposed bail in a Halifax hearing, citing the “apparent scandal” that would pertain if an accused murderer were freed without regard for public perception.

Mr. Justice Cutthroat granted Seville’s release on \$100 bail, without cash or property as security, noting the background of the case indicated the victim had been an “evil drunk.”

Seville will be tried in Jarvis in October. (118)

The incomplete date notation in the poem’s title suggests that the article could be found at any point in the twentieth century, not just the 1930’s. Minimized black death is both a historical and contemporary phenomenon that produces a specific type of rhetoric. In the news article, Othello isn’t named until the second paragraph while focus falls on the transgressor, Seville. Othello, in this way, is less important as the victim than Seville is as the perpetrator. Clarke highlights the absurdity and the structurally corrupt nature of the Canadian justice system through his satirical naming of court officials. The court is concerned with preserving a pious and cutthroat system that generates money through the suffering of the nation’s vulnerable citizens—a citizenship not readily considered within a system that produces a “white-washed jury” (122). Seville is granted

bail and later acquitted under the auspices of “self-defense” (122) because Othello has been denigrated as an “evil drunk” instead of recognized as a man protecting his family—a man given so little respect that his name is misspelled in “two hundred thousand tabloids.” Here, Clarke highlights the social rhetoric used to dehumanize black people as inherently criminal. This has been seen time and time again in the murders of Graham Cromwell, Freddie Gray, Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and many others who were reported to be thugs or monsters capable of inhuman feats of strength. In the poem “The Testimony of Othello Clemence,” Othello asks if Seville’s vicious attack, in which he “follow[ed] the lead” of the shotgun with a “butterknife,” “sound as though he killed in self-defence?” (121). Othello’s testimony is a necessary corrective to the media and judicial versions of the story of his murder. The heartache, here, is that Othello “died anyway,” his testimony already silenced (121).

Clarke’s presentation of Othello’s martyrdom and the trauma enacted on the community in the face of failed racialized systems of power is a potent corrective. *Whylah Falls* performs what Christina Sharpe calls “wake work” for and among black people living “in the wake” of slavery, under the historical weight and generational traumas that come with the rendering of their ancestors’ identities as property. Wake work’s purpose is to resist the precarity of being racialized black in the diaspora by “imagin[ing] new ways to live in the wake of slavery, in slavery’s afterlives, to survive (and more) the afterlife of property.” Sharpe continues, “In short, I mean wake work to be a mode of inhabiting *and* rupturing this episteme with our known lived and un/imaginable lives” (18, emphasis in original). Wake work, then, is a way of representing and exploring lived black experience, including the absences and traumas wrought by slavery—from ruptured genealogical lines to redlining and police brutality—as well as articulating the beauty found in black diasporic experience. Aesthetically, this presentation of the ugly and the

beautiful simultaneously is a blues configuration. From Houston Baker's inclusion of the blues's capacity for antimonic irony to the blues colloquialism "laughing to keep from crying," there is a blues connotation to Sharpe's critical model, one in which the good and bad coexist. Her critical model asks for representations of a "blackened consciousness that would rupture the structural silences produced and facilitated by, and that produce and facilitate, Black social and physical death" (22). Wake work is black resistive expression and representation, and, for Clarke, appropriation.

Clarke's wake work not only shows the damaging rhetoric and devastating violence that produce black social and physical death but also presents a dynamic and distinct black identity in a space historically ignored within the configurations of the black diaspora. He lays bare the damage done to the community by exposing the structural machinations that allow for black people to be murdered without repercussion or concern for their communities ("silence whines in the legislature" [*Whylah Falls* 114]). In so doing, Clarke presents a small rural black community in Nova Scotia as a "site of conflict and cultural formation" (Woods 30).⁷⁵ Clarke's "snowy, northern Mississippi" uncovers and recovers an Atlantic Canadian blackness informed by the history of Canada's development as a nation distinct from the US as well as by the black people who make up the space itself. Clarke says it another way, "I also discovered my oral heritage, namely, the Afro-Nova Scotian *Africadian* vernacular. After all, speech or rhetoric is the true base of poetry. Tropology is signification. I sought to restore the verbal magic of African United

⁷⁵ Clyde Woods argues that the "plantation was a site of conflict and cultural formation" in his *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta* (1998). The plantation in Woods' argument acts as a contact zone that produces a distinct artifact in its wake, the blues. Woods' argument is spatially located, where the southern plantation is this generative site. The dynamics of the hierarchy of power and systems of control found in the plantation, however, are not distinct to the US South. Enslavement, agricultural development, and the cultural products developed therein are indicative of the Black Diaspora across the Atlantic. It would be more helpful to consider the ways in which a plantation structure informs black Nova Scotian experience than it would be to argue how they differ.

Baptist Association sermons. Shouts, hollers, coos, cries, screams—the jazz of life—are the music I sought to record. I ain’t jawin’: a li’l thoughtful yields the real deal. Words be my milk and meat for life. Am I lyin’? All I gotta do is stay black and die” (*Whylah Falls* xxiii).

Coda: What About Drake?

This final half of my dissertation has focused on the way blues migrates and is appropriated as a means of self-expression by a range of non-African American authors, including American Indigenous and Canadian First Nations and African Canadians. Instead of producing a racial fantasy where US black experience is a mask to be worn and discarded, Joy Harjo, Richard Wagamese, Sherman Alexie, Drew Hayden Taylor, and George Elliott Clarke use the blues to bring attention to their experiences in a way that aligns those experiences with the history of African Americans without wholly subsuming them in that history. Beyond the cases I’ve proposed through looking at blues literature, this appropriative gesture is itself part of a larger phenomenon within popular culture. For example, one of the more dominant black Canadian figures at this particular moment is Aubrey Drake Graham, known globally by his stage name, Drake. Black Canada gained an international spotlight with Drake’s meteoric rise to the top of the popular rap scene. Drake himself is a complex figure. His father is a black American from Memphis, Tennessee (providing not only black but southern roots), and his mother is a white Jewish Canadian from Toronto (a Canadian cosmopolitan center). When Drake began his career, he was an easy target for black American derision. He was first known for his role in the Canadian teen drama *Degrassi: The Next Generation*, where he played Jimmy Brooks, a young budding basketball star whose career was cut short when he was shot by a classmate. Drake spends the majority of his acting career in a wheelchair providing a visual throwback to

the character “Wheels,” a mainstay in the first iteration of *Degrassi*. Drake left the show to pursue his music. With three successful self-produced mixtapes on his label, October’s Very Own (OVO), Drake became the subject of a bidding war between competing rap music labels. Lil Wayne’s label, Young Money Entertainment, won out. Drake was introduced to the American, and later the global, rap scene.

Drake’s endorsement by an influential American rapper with reputable “street” credentials and his early appropriation of what we would consider more *underground* rap lyrics, propelled him onto the mainstage.⁷⁶ Drake, however, doesn’t attempt to be something that he isn’t. He doesn’t assume some sort of hardened rap persona from the ninth ward in New Orleans—Lil Wayne’s neighborhood—but, instead, he produces a more emotionally vulnerable and self-focused hip hop mixed with the expected rap tropes concerning money, cars, and women. This softer side of Drake has been both the secret to his global popularity and the focus of established rappers’ ire. In a particularly sympathetic and astute article, Michael Paterniti puts Drake’s sensitivity and its double-edged properties into context:

This is Drake's constant quest, to search out that emotional connection, even in a crowd of 18,000. That's both his power and, according to his Internet parodists and haters, his Achilles' heel: his willingness to show emotion, to write revealing, autobiographical lyrics, and on occasion, between the rapper tropes of bravado and materialism, to demonstrate a flash of moral conscience in a game of misogynistic excess. And for his trouble, he's been called a “counterfeit rapper” (Ludacris), “a fuckin' piece of shit” (DMX), and “a straight pussy” (Lil' Kim), and cajoled to “come out the closet” (Chris

⁷⁶ One of the most memorable and blatant appropriations of lyrics was Drake’s use of Dead Prez’s “Hip Hop” in his hit single “Over.”

Brown). Common rapped: *You so black and white, trying to live a nigga's life... / You ain't wet nobody, nigga, you Canada dry.* And that's coming from *Common*. (n.p.)

While Drake blithely observes that “they don’t criticize the music itself, though . . . I’m okay with that,” there are some implicit biases present that signal African American cultural supremacy’s reaction to a young mixed-race Canadian, albeit one who self-identifies as black. While Chris Brown, Lil’ Kim, and DMX’s attacks focus on the quality of Drake’s person, insinuating that he must be a homosexual or weak because he shares his emotions, Ludacris and Common’s comments speak to Drake’s authenticity as a rapper and as a black man. Such comments are part of a larger feud or “beef” between the rappers and Drake, which, strangely enough, works in a circuitous fashion. To be in a rap beef with Drake certifies him as an MC, even if the comments deride his musical ability and question his blackness. Though these derogatory remarks came at an earlier moment in Drake’s career—the interview with *Paterniti* was published in 2013—they illustrate the ease at which Drake’s rap persona can be attacked and discounted due to his non-American blackness and Canadian citizenship.

Drake’s blackness is called into question in multiple ways that help illustrate my argument about the potency (or lack thereof) of Canadian-black representation. First, he is not seen as black enough in Common’s Chicago-born-and-raised eyes. Drake is playing at living, what Common calls, a “nigga’s life,” by using tropes of a masculine black urban culture. Drake’s experience of growing up a child actor and then producing mixtapes in his basement (I loosely paraphrase) holds no “black” cultural weight within Common’s perspective. How can Drake be hip hop if he hasn’t lived hip hop? Second, Drake’s blackness is questioned because of his mixed-race heritage, compounded by the fact that his black father returned to the US, leaving him to be raised by his white Jewish mother in Toronto. Much in the way that Ismael Reed

represents Canada as a white Americanized space, Common cannot conceive of a black presence across the Canada-US border. Common's comment may also be a product of that specific moment in time just as much as it is representative of intraracial colorism and the discrimination mixed-race people experience in the black community. While Janelle Monae's rise in the charts and her establishment as an essential figure in black popular culture is coextensive with Drake's, we also see the rise of other mixed-race figures like the hard-lined dandy Jidenna, and the outspoken Logic. And third, Drake's blackness, which lies at the heart of all these comments, simply can't be *black* because he is, after all, Canadian. He is more Canadian (i.e., white) than he is black.

Drake, too, knows how to use his own celebrity as persona. In a particularly entertaining and racially complex 2016 *Saturday Night Live* skit, Drake plays Jared, a young dreadlocked black Canadian alongside Amir (Jay Pharoah), Keeley (Sasheer Zamata), and their host Darnell Hayes (Keenan Thompson) on the game show "Black Jeopardy." A recent favorite on *SNL*, since they have expanded the number of black cast members to three, Black Jeopardy has been used to poke fun at "basic" white women or, in a particularly salient and on the nose sketch, to humorously show the connection between a Make-America-Great-Again disenfranchised poor white (played by Tom Hanks) and the current lot of everyday black people. In Drake's version of the skit, the crux of the joke is that Jared won't really be able to successfully perform on the show because his Canadianness is black ignorance. Drake's character has a thick Canadian accent, he has a large smile, and he is very clearly excited to be there—he has no *cool*.

Jared's accent confuses the host, Darnell, because he is unable to locate Jared's origins. Jared explains that he is a "Canadianer (sic) man." Darnell responds somewhat incredulously, "Wait, you're a black Canadian?" Jared, still smiling widely, shakes it off with, "Obviously, dog.

I mean, like, yo, there's thousands of us. I'm sure you've met a few of us before." Darnell scoffs and responds resolutely, "Nope! Never met one." The skit proceeds to make jokes about "knee-length Easter suits ... with a whole mess of buttons," purchasing hair, heating your home with "oven-heat," and Jay-Z now having "100 problems," which are all referents to an assumed national-US black culture. Jared makes a series of humorous mistakes where he refers to Canadian comedian, Rick Moranis, and seems oblivious to who Tyler Perry is. Attempting to answer a question about an older sports player who is "still putting up big numbers," Jared confidently responds, "This is easy. Who's my man, Jaromir Jagr, yo?," a famous and established Czech hockey player in the NHL. Darnell stutters, flabbergasted: "I said, a Yarmer, a say what now?" Jared explains, "Come on, dog. He's a hockey player. The man won the Art Ross Trophy four years in a row, fam." The exchange continues:

Darnell: (stuttering) eh, eh, eh, Jared! I know you're speaking English, but, uh, it ain't my English. Alright? The actual answer was, Dirk, Ne-, Nebizkit (sic).

Jared: Come on, Darnell, black people live all over the world, G. You can't just put us all into one category, like...

Darnell: Maybe so, Jared. I'm going to let you go ahead and tell that to our American police.

What makes this exchange between Jared and Darnell so intellectually rich is that both US and Canadian blackness are on the comedic chopping block. Darnell's complete inability to read Jared's black Canadianness fulfills the stereotype that black Canada doesn't exist. It also highlights the imaginary status of a history in which the black diaspora across the Atlantic Basin magically stopped at a national border that didn't yet exist. Of course there are black people within the reaches of French and English (Western European) colonial spaces. Yet Jared and the

“thousands” of black Canadians he represents are invisible and non-existent. Darnell, Amir, and Keeley, perform a dominant US black culture for which hockey and Rick Moranis hold no value. And while Jared’s use of Jaromir Jagr and the Art Ross Trophy seem so foreign that his English is unrecognizable, Darnell is unable to correctly say white German basketball player, Dirk Nowitzki’s name correctly. Darnell’s Euro-white English fails him, and Jared seems more assimilated to a colonial culture than to a cosmopolitan one. Jared’s frustrated claim that not all black people can fit into a single type of essentialized blackness dominated by African American values and codes rings true and provides a space within which national variations of black experience might be appreciated. However, Jared’s call for nuanced black diasporic experience is quickly deconstructed by a very real US problem: police violence.

Darnell’s sobering retort is an urgent reminder of a US black reality in which one’s national heritage cannot protect one from the color of one’s skin under the barrel of a police officer’s gun. Excessive US police violence that leads to black death has recently been under intense scrutiny. The website *Mapping Police Violence* plots police killings on an appalling time-lapsed world map where each day and location is recorded and played out on repeat. According to the website, police in the US killed 1,147 people in 2017 and “Black people were 25% (282) of those killed despite being only 13% of the population.” Since the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, MO in August of 2014, we’ve seen the rise of the civil rights activist group Black Lives Matter. We have also seen a rise in popularized and sensationalized police shootings, misconduct, and assault leading to death. Recall the illegal police choke hold that led to Eric Garner’s heart failure in 2014, which launched the “I Can’t Breathe” campaign—a refrain memorializing his final words. Remember too Laquan McDonald (2014), Tamir Rice (2014), Walter L. Scott (2015), Freddie Gray (2015), Sandra Bland (2015), Samuel DuBose (2015),

Christian Taylor (2015), Alton B. Sterling (2016), Philando Castile (2016), Terence Crutcher (2016), and Keith Lamont Scott (2016) to name only a few.⁷⁷

This all goes to say that Darnell's joke in the *SNL* skit issues a warning about a dangerous reality where black skin marks you as a target despite the origins of your passport. The skit, however, goes into a commercial break about top foil (the use of tin foil to cover your food on the way to the cookout) and heating your home with "oven heat." The tension of Darnell's claim is dispelled while its weight remains. Jared and Darnell go into a final exchange about rap, and Jared mentions the Toronto rapper Kardinal Offishall, the Juno Awards (the annual Canadian music awards), and Drake. Darnell responds a bit flabbergastedly and says, "You know it is like it [Jared] landed here on Earth from a spaceship." Black Canadian and Canadian cultural production is so foreign that it sounds alien, other-worldly. Darnell then says, "Jared, I think Canada has messed with your blackness, man." To which Jared replies, "Well, why do I have to be your definition of black, huh? You are judging me before you even know me. It's making me *so angry inside*, dog!" The skit ends with Jared winning the game because he said the "secret black phrase of the day," leaving Jared relieved that he won but the politics of blackness still relatively obscured. Has Jared been welcomed into the fold because his interior black identity is now more aligned with US black experience: anger? Or, has Jared's Canadian variation been subsumed to leave him either a derivative of US blackness or part of a larger black Atlantic diasporic community?

⁷⁷ This crisis of police violence has not only been an impetus for community building and renewed activism, but it has also become part of the literary landscape. Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give* (2017) is a young adult novel—and film released in the Fall of 2018—that follows a young black girl, Starr Carter, who is from a black neighborhood but goes to a predominantly white private school. She witnesses the murder of her close friend, Khalil, by a police officer. As the novel progresses, Starr finds her voice and becomes actively involved in protest. The novel provides access to the human interactions and the close-knit communities of neighborhoods that are typically disparaged on national media and easily discounted as "ghettos" filled with "thugs."

I've analyzed this skit at length to articulate the constrictive and nuanced power dynamics affecting black diasporic peoples on the US stage, quite literally in this case. African American blackness is considered to be the dominant form; Canadian blackness is understood to be "less black," culturally deficient in various ways. Drake, the musician, however, has taken African American cultural and musical modes and aligned them with a more expansive black diasporic sound to highlight a global persona with Canadian roots.⁷⁸ In his studio albums *Views* (2016) and *More Life* (2017), Drake incorporates black diasporic music from Canada, the United States, England, South Africa, and the Caribbean (Ryan n.p.). His musical sampling from the "repertoires of black popular culture" realigns the signifier "black" with the diaspora and decenters African American cultural supremacy (Hall 109). Drake's music uses New Orleans Bounce music, Afrobeats from Lagos, Caribbean Dancehall music, all mixed with his representation of "the 6"—his name for Toronto—to create a dynamic and expansive black popular culture more aligned with Stuart Hall's definition of expression that has "come to signify the black community, where these traditions were kept, and whose struggles survive in the persistence of the black experience (the historical experience of black people in the diaspora), of the black aesthetic (the distinctive cultural repertoires out of which popular representations were made), and of the black counternarratives we have struggled to voice" (110). Drake's black cultural fluency represents a global black musical aesthetic.

There have, however, been some claims that Drake has appropriated these black cultural sounds and is at fault for not properly citing his influences or irresponsibly stealing samples without supporting the original artists.⁷⁹ This line of argument considers Drake to be Canadian

⁷⁸ For more on Drake as a hybrid figure, see Amara Pope's "Musical Artists Capitalizing on Hybrid Identities: A Case Study of Drake the 'Authentic' 'Black' 'Canadian' 'Rapper.'"

⁷⁹ See the CBC's "Drake's Global Sound Under Fire for Cultural Appropriation."

first and black second, hemmed in by his regional and national identities. As a black person in diaspora, Drake's abundant musical influences reminds us that there "are no pure forms" of black popular culture; instead, these "forms are the product of partial synchronization, of engagement across cultural boundaries, of the confluence of more than one cultural tradition, of the negotiations of dominant and subordinate positions, of the subterranean strategies of recording and transcoding, of critical signification, of signifying" (Hall 110). Drake's ability to create a homogenous sound out of myriad cultural influences is the blackest part of his music. He uses his subordinated position as black Canadian to create a more global black music. Drake "disrupt[s] the U.S. dominance of how black experience is represented in western popular culture" while simultaneously locating black Canada as an important expressive geography along the black diaspora (Yates). Through Drake, black Canadian cultural output revises African American and black diasporic cultural forms producing a black Canadian variation of hip hop.

LIST OF REFERENCES

- Abbott, Lynn, and Doug Seroff. *The Original Blues: The Emergence of the Blues in African American Vaudeville*. UP of Mississippi, 2017.
- Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. The New Press, 2012.
- Alexander, Patrick Elliot. *From Slave Ship to Supermax: Mass Incarceration, Prisoner Abuse, and the New Neo-Slave Novel*. Temple UP, 2017.
- Alexie, Sherman. *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. Atlantic Monthly, 1993.
- . "Red Blues." *Old Shirts & New Skins*. American Indian Studies Center, U of California, Los Angeles, 1993.
- . *Reservation Blues*. Atlantic Monthly, 1995.
- Als, Hilton. *Women*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 1998.
- Andrews, Scott. "A New Road and a Dead End in Sherman Alexie's Reservation Blues." *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory*, vol. 63, no. 2, 2007, pp. 137-152. *MLA International Bibliography*. 18 May. 2015.
- Asher Daniels, Melissa, Gregory Laski, Adam Bradley, John Ernest, Soyica Diggs Colbert, Russ Castronovo, Sharon P Holland, and Kenneth Warren. "Assessing *What Was African American Literature?*; or, The State of the Field in the New Millenium." *African American Review*, vol. 44, no. 4, 2011, pp. 567-91.
- Baker, Houston A. *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*. U Chicago P, 1984.

- Baker, Houston Jr. and Dana Nelson. "Preface: Violence, the Body, and 'The South.'" *American Literature*, vol. 73, no. 2, June 2001, pp. 231-244.
- Baldwin, James. "The Uses of the Blues." *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*. Vintage International, 2010.
- "Banjo, etymology." *Oxford English Dictionary*. 28 May 2019.
- Banks, Michelle. "Myth-Making and Exile: The Desire for a Homeplace in George Elliott Clarke's *Whylah Falls*." *Canadian Poetry*, vol. 51, pp. 58-85.
- Barry, John M. *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How it Changed America*. Simon & Schuster, 1998.
- Bell, Christopher. "A Century Lacking Progress: The Fractured Community in *Gem of the Ocean* and *King Hedley II*." *August Wilson's Pittsburgh Cycle: Critical Perspectives on The Plays*. McFarland, 2016, pp. 117-27.
- Berlin, Ira. "American Slavery in History and Memory and the Search for Social Justice." *The Journal of American history*, March 2004, pp. 1251-68.
- Bertrand, Michael T. "Elvis Presley and the Politics of Popular Memory." *Southern Cultures*, vol. 13, no. 3, Fall 2017, pp. 62-86.
- Best, Stephen. "Code-Switching: An Interview with James Hannaham." *Public Books*. Nov. 15, 2016. <http://www.publicbooks.org/code-switching-an-interview-with-james-hannaham/>
- Bird, Gloria. "The Exaggeration of Despair in Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues*." *Wicazo Sa Review*, vol. 11, no. 2, Autumn 1995, pp. 47-52. *MLA International Bibliography*. 18 May. 2015.
- Bissoondath, Neil. *Selling Illusions: The Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada*. Penguin, 1994.

“Black Lives Matter Stands in Solidarity with Water Protectors at Standing Rock.” 3 Sept. 2016.

Black Lives Matter. 18 Sept. 2017. <http://blacklivesmatter.com/solidarity-with-standing-rock/>

Bolden, Tony. *Afro-blue: Improvisations in African American Poetry and Culture*. U of Illinois P, 2004.

Bowe, John. “It’s Not Even Past.” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 24 March 2015.

<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/even-past/>

Bradford, Perry. *Born with the Blues*. Oak Publications, 1965.

Brand, Dionne. *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*. Vintage Canada, 2001.

Brooks, Daphne. “1920, August 10: Mamie Smith Becomes the First Black Woman to Make a Phonograph Record: A New Voice of the Blues.” In *A New Literary History of America*, edited by Greil Marcus and Werner Sollors, Harvard UP, 2009.

Brown, Sterling. “The Blues.” *Phylon*, vol. 13, no. 4, 1952, pp. 286-92

---. “The Blues as Folk Poetry.” In *Folk Say I*, edited by B. A. Botkin, U of Oklahoma P, 1930, pp. 324-39.

Burnett, Charles dir. *Killer of Sheep*. Milestone Films. 1978.

Butler, Octavia. *Kindred*. Beacon Press, 2003.

Carby, Hazel V. “It Jus Be’s Dat Way Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Women’s Blues.” In *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, edited by Robert G. O’Meally, Columbia UP, 1998, pp. 470-83.

Césaire, Aimé. *Discourse on Colonialism*. Monthly Review Press, 1950.

Chariandry, David. “‘Against the South’: The Mississippi of Black Writing in Canada.” *The Global South*, vol. 9, no. 1. 2016, pp. 62-69.

- . "'Canada in Us Now': Locating the Criticism of Black Canadian Writing." *Essays on Canadian Writing*, no. 75, Winter 2002, pp. 196-216.
- . "'The Fiction of Belonging': On Second-Generation Black Writing in Canada." *Callaloo*, vol. 20, no. 3, 2007, pp. 818-829.
- CBC Radio. "Drake's Global Sound Under Fire for Cultural Appropriation." *CBC*, Oct. 30, 2018, <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/thecurrent/the-current-for-march-24-2017-1.4038259/drake-s-global-sound-under-fire-for-cultural-appropriation-1.4038264>.
- Chatterton Williams, Thomas. *Losing My Cool: Love, Literature, and a Black Man's Escape from the Crowd*. Penguin. 2011.
- Cheng, Bill. *Southern Cross the Dog*. Ecco, 2014.
- Chinitz, David. "Literacy and Authenticity: The Blues Poems of Langston Hughes." *Callaloo*, vol. 19, no. 1, 1996, pp. 177-92.
- Churchill, Ward and Jim Vander Wall. *Agents of Repression: The FBI's Secret Wars Against the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement*. South End P, 2002.
- Clarke, George Elliott. "For Cryin Out Loud: Moanin' Sorrow and Talkin' Regret in Ezra Pound's *The Pisan Cantos* and M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*" Abstract. Spring 2018.
- . *Odysseys Home: Mapping African-Canadian Literature*. U of Toronto P, 2002.
- . *Saltwater Spirituals and Deeper Blues*. Porter's Lake, N.S.: Pottersfield Press, 1983.
- . *Whylah Falls*. Polestar, 2000.
- Coates, Ta-Nehisi. "The Case for Reparations." *The Atlantic*, June 2014.
- Cobb, James. *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity*. Oxford UP, 1992.

- Commentale, Edward P. *Sweet Air: Modernism, Regionalism, and American Popular Song*. U Chicago P, 2013. Print.
- Compton, Anne. "Standing Your Ground: George Elliott Clarke in Conversation." *SCL/ÉLC*, vol. 23, no. 2, 1998, pp. 138-64.
- Cooper, Afua. *The Hanging of Angelique: The Untold Story of Canadian Slavery and the Burning of Old Montreal*. U of Georgia P, 2007.
- Crossroads*. Dir. Walter Hill. Perf. Joe Seneca and Ralph Macchio. Columbia Pictures. 1986. DVD
- Cyrus, Billy Ray. "Achy Breaky Heart." *Some Gave All*. Mercury Records, 1992.
- Dainotto, Roberto. "South by Chance: Southern Questions on the Global South." *The Global South*, vol. 1, no. 2. 2017, pp. 39-53.
- Damas, Léon. *Mine de Rien*. Africana Homestead Legacy Publishers, 1977.
- Daniels, Pete. *Deep'n As It Come: The 1927 Mississippi River Flood*. U of Arkansas P, 1998.
- Däwes, Birgit, and Drew Hayden Taylor. "An Interview with Drew Hayden Taylor." *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 44, no. 1, 2003, pp. 1–18. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/1209060.
- Davidson, Joe. "6 Million Citizens, Including 1 in 13 African Americans, Are Blocked from Voting Because of Felonies." *Washington Post*, 7 October 2016.
- Davis, Angela Y. *Black Legacies and Blues Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*. Pantheon Books, 1998.
- Desilver, Drew. "Black Unemployment Rate is Consistently Twice that of Whites." *Pew Research Center*, 21 August 2013.
- Devi, Debra. *The Language of the Blues: From Alcorub to Zuzu*. Billboard Books, 2006.

- Dixon, Willie. *I am the Blues: The Willie Dixon Story*. Da Capo, 1989.
- Duck, Leigh Anne. *The Nation's Region: Southern Modernism, Segregation, and U.S. Nationalism*. U of Georgia P, 2006.
- . "Preface: Remappings—Canada and the US South in a Global Age." *The Global South*, vol. 9, no. 1. 2016, pp. 1-4.
- Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man* (1952). Vintage International, 1995. Print.
- . "Richard Wright's Blues." *Shadow and Act*. Vintage International, 1995, pp. 77-94.
- Epstein, Dena J. "The Folk Banjo: A Documentary History." *Ethnomusicology*, vol. 19, no. 3, Sept. 1975, pp. 347-71.
- Ernst, John. *Chaotic Justice: Rethinking African American Literary History*. U of North Carolina P, 2009.
- Estabrook, Barry. *Tomatoland: How Modern Industrial Agriculture Destroyed our most Alluring Fruit*. Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2012.
- Evans, David. *Big Road Blues: Tradition and Creativity in the Folk Blues*. Da Capo, 1987.
- . "High Water Everywhere: Blues and Gospel Commentary on the 1927 Mississippi River Flood." *Nobody Knows Where the Blues Come From: Lyrics and History*, edited by Robert Springer, Randall Cherry, et al., UP of Mississippi, 2006, pp. 3-75. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt2tvkmc.5.
- . "Robert Johnson: Pact with the Devil? Pt. 1." *Blues Revue*, no. 21, Feb. 1996, pp. 12-13.
- . "Traditional Blues lyrics and Myth: Some Correspondences." *The Lyrics in African American Popular Music: Proceedings of Metz (September 29th-30th, 2000) = Le Texte Dans La Musique Populaire Afro-américaine: Actes Du Colloque International De Metz (29-30 Septembre 2000)*. Edited by Peter Lang, P. Lang, 2001, pp. 17-40.

- Fabre, Geneviève and Robert O'Meally. "Introduction." In *History and Memory in African-American Culture*, edited by Geneviève Fabre and Robert O'Meally, Oxford UP, 1994, pp. 3-17.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Toward the African Revolution*. Translated by Haakon Chevalier. Grove Press, 1967.
- Ferguson, Jade. "'This is our Alabama': Racial Segregation, Discrimination, and Violence in Tamio Wakayama's *Signs of Life*." *The Global South*, vol. 9, no. 1. 2016, pp. 124-146.
- Ferguson, Josh-Wade. "Perpetual Reckoning: An Interview with Kiese Laymon." *New Ohio Review Online*. <https://newohioreview.org/2019/04/16/an-interview-with-kiese-laymon/>
- Ferris, William. "Richard Wright and the Blues." *The Mississippi Quarterly*, vol. 61, no. 4, Fall 2008, pp. 539-52.
- Fitz, Karsten, and Klaus-Dieter Gross. "Native American Literature as a Transcultural and Multimedia Experience: Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues*." *Amerikastudien/American Studies*, vol. 52, no. 3, 2007, pp. 417-443. *MLA International Bibliography*. 15 May 2015.
- "For Action on Race Riot Peril: Radical Propagande Among Negroes Growing, And Increase of Violence Set Out in Senate Brief for Federal Inquiry." *The New York Times*, 15 October 1919, pp 112.
- Ford, Douglas. "Sherman Alexie's Indigenous Blues." *Critical Insights: Sherman Alexie*, 2011, pp. 169-188. *Literary Reference Center*. 18 May 2015.
- Fraile-Marcos, Ana María. "The Transcultural Intertextuality of George Elliott Clarke's African 'Canadianité': (African) American Models Shaing George & Rue." *African American Review*, vol. 47, no. 1, Spring 2014, pp. 113-28.

- Gantt, Patricia M. "Putting Black Culture on Stage: August Wilson's Pittsburgh Cycle." *College Literature*, vol. 36, no. 2, 2009, pp. 1-25.
- Gates, Henry Louis Jr. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Criticism*. Oxford UP, 1988.
- Gillan, Jennifer. "Reservation Home Movies: Sherman Alexie's Poetry." *Critical Insights: Sherman Alexie*, 2011, pp. 202-224. *Literary Reference Center*. 15 May 2015.
- Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Harvard UP, 1993.
- Gunew, Sneja. "Foreword: Speaking to Joseph." In *Echo: Essays on Other Literature*, by Joseph Pivato. Guernica Editions Ltd., 1994, pp. 7-31.
- Guralnick, Peter. *Searching for Robert Johnson*. Dutton, 1989. Print.
- Gussow, Adam. *Beyond the Crossroads: The Devil and the Blues Tradition*. U of North Carolina P, 2017.
- . "'Fingering the Jagged Grain': Ellison's Wright and the Southern Blues Violence." *Boundary* 2, vol. 30, no. 2, Summer 2003, pp. 137-55.
- . "'If Bessie Smith Had killed Some White People': Racial Legacies, the Blues Revival, and the Black Arts Movement." In *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement*, edited by Lisa Gall Collins and Margo Natalie Crawford, Rutgers UP, 2006, pp 227-52.
- . "Is or Ain't Your Blues Like Mine?: A Brief Critical History of White Blues Literature." *Journeyman's Road: Modern Blues Lives from Faulkner's Mississippi to Post-9/11 New York*, U of Tennessee P, 2007.
- . *Seems Like Murder Here: Southern Violence and the Blues Tradition*. U of Chicago P, 2002.
- . "'Shoot Myself a Cop': Mamie Smith's 'Crazy Blues' as Social Text." *Callaloo*, vol. 25, no. 1, Winter 2002, pp. 8-44.

- Hafen, P Jane. "Rock and Roll, Redskins, and Blues in Sherman Alexie's Work." Edited by Jeff Berglund and Jan Roush. *Sherman Alexie: A Collection of Critical Essays*. U of Utah P, 2010, pp. 62-73.
- Hall, Stuart. "What is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" *Social Justice*, vol. 20, nos. 1-2, Spring-Summer 1993, pp. 104-14.
- Hall, Perry A. "African-American Music: Dynamics of Appropriation and Innovation." *Borrowed Power: Essays on Cultural Appropriation*. Edited by Bruce Ziff and Pratima V. Rao. Rutgers UP, 1997, pp.31-51.
- Handy, W.C. *Father of the Blues*. Da Capo, 1941.
- Hannaham, James. *Delicious Foods*. Back Bay Books, 2015.
- Harjo, Joy. "Everybody has a Heartache." *Poetry Foundation*, 2014.
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/56836/everybody-has-a-heartache-a-blues>
- Harpo, Slim. "I'm a King Bee." Excello Records, 1957.
- Hartman, Saidiya. *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. Farrar, Strous and Giroux, 2007.
- . *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. Oxford UP, 1997.
- Herskovits, Melville. *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1941). Beacon P, 1990.
- Highway, Tomson. *Kiss of the Fur Queen*. U of Oklahoma P, 1998.
- Hill, Sean II. "Precarity in the Era of #BlackLivesMatter." *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly*, vol. 45, no. 3 & 4, Fall/Winter 2017, pp. 94-109.

- Hinton, Elizabeth. "From 'War on Crime' to War on the Black Community: The enduring Impact of President Johnson's Crime Commission." *Boston Review*, 21 June 2016.
- "The History." *Tuckahoe Plantation*. Accessed: 6 June 2019.
- <http://www.tuckahoeplantation.com/history/>
- House, Son. "Death Letter Blues." *Father of the Folk Blues*. Columbia. 1965.
- Hudak, Joseph. "'Achy Breaky Heart' at 25: Inside Billy Ray Cyrus' Polarizing Hit." *Rolling Stone*. Rolling Stone, 26 May 2017. 29 June 2017
- Hughes, Langston. *The Big Sea*. Knopf, 1940.
- . "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." 1926. *The Concise Heath Anthology of American Literature: Volume 2 1865 to the Present*. Cengage Learning, 2014, pp. 809-13.
- . "Po' Boy Blues." *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*. Knopf, 1994.
- . "Songs Called the Blues." *Phylon*, vol. 2, no. 2, 143-45, 1941.
- . *The Weary Blues*. Knopf, (1926) 2015.
- Hurston, Zora Neale. "Halimuhfack." *Library of Congress*, Oct. 30, 2018, <https://www.loc.gov/item/flwpa000014/>.
- . *Mules and Men*. HarperPerennial, 1935.
- . *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. New York: Perennial Library, 1990. Print.
- Hurt, Mississippi John. "Stack O' Lee." Shellac Records, 1929.
- Johnson, Patricia and Walter Farrell, Jr. "How Langston Hughes Used the Blues." *MELUS*, vol. 6, no. 1, 1979, pp. 55-63.
- Johnson, Robert. "Rambling on My Mind." *Robert Johnson, the Complete Recordings*. Columbia, 1990. CD.

Jones, Gayl. *Corregidora*. Bluestreak, 1975.

Jones, Leroi. *Blues People; Negro Music in White America*. New York: W. Morrow, 1963. Print.

Jones-Bammam, Richard. *Building New Banjos for an Old-Time World*. U of Illinois P, 2017.

Kaadzi Ghansah, Rachel. "When the Lights Shut Off: Kendrick Lamar and the Decline of the Black Blues Narrative." *Los Angeles Review of Books*. Jan. 31, 2013.

<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/when-the-lights-shut-off-kendrick-lamar-and-the-decline-of-the-black-blues-narrative/#!>

Karenga, Ron. "On Black Art: A Rhythmic Reality of Revolution." *Negro Digest*, vol. 17, no 3, 1968, pp 9.

King, Martin Luther Jr. *Conscience for Change: Massey Lectures, Seventh Series*. Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 1967.

King, Thomas. *The Inconvenient Indian: A Curious Account of Native People in North America*. U of Minnesota P, 2013.

"Killer of Sheep." *Killer of Sheep*. 6 June 2019. <https://www.killerofsheep.com/>

Komunyakaa, Yusef. "Langston Hughes + Poetry = The Blues." *Callaloo*, vol. 25, no. 4, 2002, pp. 1140-43.

Kunzru, Hari. *White Tears*. Knopf, 2017.

Lamar, Kendrick. "Sing About Me, I'm Dying of Thirst." *Good Kid, M.A.A.D. City*. Aftermath Records, 2012.

Laymon, Kiese. *How to Slowly Kill Yourself and Others in America*. Bolden, 2013.

---. *Long Division*. Bolden, 2013.

Laub, Dori. "Truth and Testimony: The Process and the Struggle." *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Edited by Cathy Caruth. Johns Hopkins UP, 1995, pp. 61-75.

- Leitch, Vincent B. "Blues Southwestern Style." *Theory Matters*. Routledge, 2003, pp. 137-164.
- Leroy, Justin. "Black History in Occupied Territory: On the Entanglements of Slavery and Settler Colonialism." *Theory and Event*, vol. 19, no. 4, 2016. HTML.
- Levecq, Christine. "Blues Poetics and Blues Politics in Walter Mosley's *RL's Dream*." *African American Review*, vol. 38, no. 2, 2004, pp. 239-256. *MLA International Bibliography*. 27 January 2014.
- Lipsitz, George. *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics*. Temple UP, 1998.
- Little Bear, Leroy. "Jagged Worldviews Colliding." 2000. *Walking Together: First Nations, Métis and Inuit Perspectives in Curriculum*. Government of Alberta.
http://www.learnalberta.ca/content/aswt/documents/fnmi_worldviews/jagged_worldviews_colliding.pdf
- Lott, Eric. *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. Oxford UP, 1993.
- Mapping Police Violence*, Oct. 30, 2018, <https://mappingpoliceviolence.org/>.
- McCall, Jason. "The Past is Not Dead: Time and Race in Kiese Laymon's *Long Division*." *Los Angeles Review of Books*. Nov. 20, 2013. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-past-is-not-dead-time-and-race-in-kiese-laymons-long-division/>
- "Meet the Band." *Gary Clark Jr.* 6 June 2019. <https://www.garyclarkjr.com/bio>
- Mester, Amanda "Bonita." "Bluesman Christ Thomas King Says He's Been Banned by the Grammys." *OffBeat Magazine*. 1 November 2018.
<http://www.offbeat.com/news/bluesman-chris-thomas-king-says-hes-banned-grammys/>

- Miller, Karl Hagstrom. *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow*. Duke UP, 2010.
- Mizelle, Richard Jr. *Backwater Blues*. U of Minnesota P, 2014.
- Morrison, Toni. "The Site of Memory." In *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, edited by William Zinsser, Houghton Mifflin, 1995, pp. 83-102.
- Mosley, Walter. *R.L.'s Dream*. Picador, 1996.
- Moss, Eugene "Buddy." "Midnight Rambler." *Buddy Moss Vol. 1 1933*, Document Records, 1992.
- Moynagh, Maureen. "Africville, an Imagined Community." *Canadian Literature*, vol. 157, Summer, 1998, pp. 14-34.
- Muir, Peter. *Long Lost Blues: Popular Blues in America, 1850-1920*. U of Illinois P, 2009.
- Murray, Albert. *Stomping the Blues*. Da Capo. (1976) 2000.
- . *Train Whistle Guitar*. Vintage, 1974.
- Neal, Larry. "Any Day Now: Black Art and Black Liberation." (1972). *Write Me a Few of Your Lines*, ed. Steven C. Tracy. U Massachusetts P, 1999, pp. 422-433.
- . "The Black Arts Movement." *The Drama Review: TDR* (1968): 29-39.
- Niles, Abbe. "Introduction: Sad Horns." In *Blues: An Anthology*, edited by W. C. Handy, Applewood Books, 1926.
- Noggle, Richard. "Waking the Dead: History and Memory in August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* and *The Piano Lesson*." *New England Theatre Journal*, vol. 19, 2008, pp. 61-73.
- Nora, Pierre. "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*." *Representations*, vol. 26, 1989, pp. 7-24.

- North, Michael. "The Making of 'Make it New.'" *Guernica*, 15 Aug. 2013.
<https://www.guernicamag.com/the-making-of-making-it-new/>
- N.W.A. "Fuck Tha Police." *Straight Outta Compton*. Priority, 1988.
- Oliver, Paul. *Blues Fell this Morning: Meaning in the Blues*. Cambridge UP, 1990.
- Oliver, Paul, Tony Russell, Robert M. W. Dixon, John Godrich, and Howard Rye. *Yonder Come the Blues: The Evolution of a Genre*. Cambridge UP, 2001.
- Palmer, Robert. *Deep Blues: A Musical and Cultural history of the Mississippi Delta*. Penguin, 1982.
- Pareles, Jon. "Adia Victoria Wants to Make the Blues Dangerous Again." *The New York Times*. 27 Feb. 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/27/arts/music/adia-victoria-silences.html>
- Parrish, Susan Scott. *The Flood Year 1927: A Cultural History*. Princeton UP, 2017.
- Paterniti, Michael. "How to Drake it in America." *Gentleman's Quarterly*, Oct. 30, 2018, <https://www.gq.com/story/rapper-drake-in-america-july-2013>.
- Plum, Jay. "Blues, History, and the Dramaturgy of August Wilson." *African American Review*, vol. 27, no. 4, 1993, pp. 561-67.
- Pope, Amara. "Musical Artists Capitalizing on Hybrid Identities: A Case Study of Drake the 'Authentic' 'Black' 'Canadian' 'Rapper.'" *Stream: Culture/Politics/Technology*, vol. 9, no. 1, pp. 3-22.
- Pound, Ezra. "Vorticism." *Fortnightly Review*, no. 96, [1 Sept. 1914], pp. 461-71.
<http://fortnightlyreview.co.uk/vorticism/>
- Pratt, Mary Louise. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. Routledge, 1992.
- Reed, Ishmael. *Flight to Canada*. Scribner, 1976.

Rios, Gabriela Raquel. “‘We’ll Get There With Music’: Sonic Literacies, Rhetorics of Alliance, and Decolonial Healing in Joy Harjo’s *Winding Through the Milky Way*.” *Indigenous Pop: Native American Music from Jazz to Hip Hop*. Edited by Jeff Berglund, Jan Johnson, and Kimberli Lee, U of Arizona P, 2016.

Robinson, Lisa. “Hot Tracks: Gary Clark Jr.” *Vanity Fair*. December 2012.

<https://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2012/12/gary-clark-jr-critics-of-blues-music>

Robinson, Zandria. “Heavy Blurb.” *Kiese Laymon*. 2018. <http://www.kieselaymon.com/>

---. “Listening for the Country: The Shape of Daddy’s Hurt.” *Oxford American*, “Southern Music Issue, no. 18: Visions of the Blues,” winter 2016.

---. *This Ain’t Chicago: Race, Class, and Regional Identity in the Post-Soul South*. U of North Carolina P, 2014.

Rushdy, Ashraf H. A. “The Neo-Slave Narrative.” *The Cambridge Companion to African American Literature*, edited by Maryemma Graham, Cambridge UP, 2004, pp. 87-105.

---. *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form*. Oxford UP, 1999.

Ryan, Blake. “Where in the World is Drake Sandiego?” *Complex*, Oct. 30, 2018, <https://www.complex.com/music/2017/03/drakes-global-influences-on-more-life/>.

Salaam, Kalamu ya. “The Blues Aesthetic.” *What is Life? Reclaiming the Black Blues Self*. Third World Press, 1994, pp. 7-20.

Schroeder, Patricia R. *Robert Johnson, Mythmaking, and Contemporary American Culture*. U Illinois P, 2004.

Senghor, Léopold Sédar. *The Collected Poems*. U of Virginia P, 1998.

“Sensational Colored Star to Play Here: Mamie Smith and Her Jazz hounds Booked for This City Feb. 9.” *Savannah Tribune*, 29 January 1921.

- Sexton, Jared. "Afro-pessimism: The Unclear Word." *Rhizomes: Cultural studies in emerging Knowledge*, vol. 29, 2016.
- . "The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism." *Time, Temporality and Violence in International Relations*. Routledge, 2016, pp. 85-99.
- . "The Vel of Slavery: Tracking the Figure of the Unsovereign." *Critical Sociology*, vol. 42, no. 4-5, 2016, pp. 583-597.
- Shannon, Sandra G, ed. *August Wilson's Pittsburgh Cycle: Critical Perspectives on The Plays*. McFarland, 2016.
- . "The Long Wait: August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*." *Black American Literature Forum*, vol. 25, no. 1, 1991, pp. 135-46.
- . "A Transplant that Did Not Take: August Wilson's Views on the Great Migration." *African American Review*, vol. 31, no. 4, 1997, 979-86.
- Sharpe, Christina. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Duke UP, 2016.
- Siemerling, Winfried. *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered: Black Canadian Writing, Cultural History, and the Presence of the Past*. McGill-Queen's UP, 2015.
- Singleton, John dir. *Boyz n the Hood*. Columbia pictures. 1991.
- Smith, Bessie. "Nobody in Town Can Bake a Sweet Jelly Roll Like Mine." *Bessie Smith: 1923, Classics*, (1923) 1994.
- Smith, Jon. "Introduction: The South in the North." *The Global South*, vol. 9, no. 1. 2016, pp. 5-8.
- Snelson, Floyd G. "Mamie Smith, First to Record the Blues, Hit Jackpot but Died Broke." *The Chicago Defender*, 26 February 1955, pp 6.

- Son Simms Four. "Ramblin' Kid Blues." Rec. Alan Lomax, Library of Congress, Stovall Mississippi, 1942.
- Stoever, Jennifer Lynn. *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening*. New York UP, 2016.
- Sullivan, John Jeremiah. "The Curses: Part 1." *The Sewanee Review*, Winter 2017.
- Tan, Kathy-Ann. *Reconfiguring Citizenship and National Identity in the North American Literary Imagination*. Wayne State UP, 2015.
- Tattie, Jon. "Africville." *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. 4 March 2015. <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/africville>
- Taylor, Drew Hayden. *The Baby Blues*. Talonbooks, 1999.
- . *The Berlin Blues*. Talonbooks, 2007.
- . *The Bootlegger Blues*. Fifth House Publishers, 1991.
- . *The Buz-Gem Blues*. Talonbooks, 2002.
- . *Cerulean Blues*. Talonbooks, 2015.
- Tellefsen, Blythe. "America is a Diet Pepsi: Sherman Alexie's Reservation Blues." *Western American Literature*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2005, pp. 125-147. *MLA International Bibliography*. 15 May. 2015.
- Thomas, Angie. *The Hate U Give*. Balzer + Bray, 2017.
- Thomas, H. Nigel. "Some Aspects of Blues Use in George Elliott Clarke's *Whylah Falls*." *CLA Journal*, vol. 43, no. 1, 1999, pp. 1-18.
- Toomer, Jean. *Cane*. Liveright, [1923] 2011.
- Touré. *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness? What it Means to be Black Now*. Free Press, 2011.

- Tracy, Steven C. *Going to Cincinnati: A History of the Blues in the Queen City*. U of Illinois P, 1993
- . *Langston Hughes and the Blues*. U of Illinois P, 1988.
- . "To the Tune of Those Weary Blues: The Influence of the Blues Tradition in Langston Hughes's Blues Poems." *MELUS*, vol. 8, no. 3, 1981, pp. 73-98.
- Tran, E. M. "Obsession, Desperation, and Curiosity: A Conversation on the Poetics of Blues with Tyehimba Jess and Derrick Harriell." *New Ohio Review Online*.
<https://newohioreview.org/2019/03/15/obsession-desperation-and-curiosity-a-conversation-on-the-poetics-of-blues-with-tyehimba-jess-and-derrick-harriell/>
- Troutman, John William. *Indian Blues: American Indians and the Politics of Music, 1879-1934*. U of Oklahoma P, 2009.
- Trudel, Marcel. *L'esclavage au Canada français: histoire et conditions de l'esclavage*. UP Quebec, 1960.
- Wagamese, Richard. *Keeper 'n Me*. 1994. Anchor Canada, 2006.
- Wagner, Bryan. *Disturbing the Peace: Black Culture and the Police Power After Slavery*. Harvard UP, 2009.
- Walcott, Rinaldo. *Black Like Who? Writing Black Canada*. Insomniac P, 1997.
- Wald, Elijah. *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues*. HarperCollins, 2004.
- Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*. Harcourt, 1982.
- . "Everyday Use." *The Harper American Literature, Single Volume Edition*, 3rd ed. Edited by Donald McQuade and Justin Kaplan, Longman, 1998, 2634-9.

Wall, Cheryl. "A Note on 'The Weary Blues.'" *Lenox Avenue: A Journal of Interarts Inquiry*, vol. 3, 1997, pp. ii-vi.

---. *Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and literary Tradition*. U of North Carolina P, 2005.

Ward, Jesmyn. "My True South: Why I Decided to Return Home." *Time Magazine*. Jul. 26, 2018. http://time.com/5349517/jesmyn-ward-my-true-south/?utm_source=facebook.com&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=social-button-sharing

---. *Salvage the Bones*. Bloomsbury, 2011.

---. *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. Scribner, 2017.

Ward, Jesmyn, and Danille K. Taylor. "Literary Voice of the Dirty South: An Interview with Jesmyn Ward." *CLA Journal* vol. 60 no.2, 2016, pp. 266-68.

Warren, Kenneth. *What Was African American Literature?* U Chicago P, 2011.

Wasserman, Jerry. "Where the Soul Still Dances: The Blues and Canadian Drama" *Essays on Canadian Writing*, no. 65, Fall 1998, pp. 56-75. Web. 12 March 2017.

---. "Whose Blues? AfriCanadian Theatre and the Blues Aesthetic." *TRIC/RTAC*, vol. 30, no. 1 and 2, 2009, pp. 37-57.

Waterman Wittstock, Laura and Elaine J. Salinas. "A Brief History of the American Indian Movement." *American Indian Movement*. 29 Jan. 2018.

<https://www.aimovement.org/ggc/history.html>

Weaver, Jace. *The Red Atlantic: American Indigenes and the Making of the Modern World, 1000-1927*. U of North Carolina P, 2014.

- Wells, Dorothy. "A Rose Grows in *Whylah Falls*: Transplanted Traditions in George Elliott Clarke's 'Africadia.'" *Canadian Literature*, no. 155, Winter 1997, pp. 56-74.
- "Who We Are." *Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate*. 4 Sept. 2017.
http://omiap.org/?page_id=10
- Wilderson, Frank B. *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of the U.S. Antagonisms*. Duke UP, 2010.
- Williams, Sherley Anne. "The Blues Roots of Contemporary African-American Poetry." *The Massachusetts Review*, vol. 18, no. 3, Autumn 1977, pp. 542-54.
- Willis, Susan. "Anansi History: George Elliott Clarke's *Whylah Falls*." *Journal of Commonwealth and Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2002, pp. 47-56.
- Wilson, August. *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. Plume, 1981.
- . "Preface to 'Three Plays.'" *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*. Edited by Robert O'Meally. Columbia UP, 1991.
- . *Seven Guitars*. Samuel French, 1996.
- Winans, Robert B., ed. *Banjo Roots and Branches*. U of Illinois P, 2018.
- Womack, Ytasha. *Afrofuturism: The world of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*. Chicago Review Press, 2013.
- Woods, Clyde. *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power*. Verso. 1998.
- Wright, Richard. *Black Boy*. HarperPerennial, 1966.
- . *Native Son*. Perennial Classics, 1993.
- Yates, Kieran. "How Drake's *More Life* Connects Music Across the Black Diaspora." *Fader*, Oct. 30, 2018, <https://www.thefader.com/2017/03/22/drake-more-life-essay-diaspora-grime-uk>.

VITA

ACADEMIC APPOINTMENTS

2019 Assistant Professor, Tougaloo College, Department of English

EDUCATION

2019 Ph.D. in Literature (University of Mississippi)
Dissertation: "Rambling Blues: Mapping Contemporary North American Blues Literature"
Committee: Adam Gussow (Director) Jay Watson, Leigh Anne Duck, Derrick Harriell, and Anthony Bolden (Kansas)

2012 M.A. in English (University of Saskatchewan)

2011 B.A. in English (High Honours) (University of Saskatchewan)

PUBLICATIONS

"The Africadian Blues: A Conversation with George Elliott Clarke" *The Global South*. (Forthcoming 2020).

"That Swampy Sound: The Politics of Identity in Swamp Music" *Swamp Souths: Literary and Cultural Ecologies*. Eds. Eric Gary Anderson, Taylor Hagood, Kirstin Squint, and Anthony Wilson. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, Forthcoming Spring 2020)

Jay Watson, Robert J. Briggs, Josh-Wade Ferguson, and Andrew Thomas, "The Cormac McCarthy Journals: The Single-Author Graduate Course." *Approaches to Teaching the Works of Cormac McCarthy*. Eds. Stacey Peebles and Benjamin West. (New York: MLA, Forthcoming).

"Perpetual Reckoning: An Interview with Kiese Laymon." *New Ohio Review*. 16 April 2019.

"Traded it off for that Voodoo thing: Cultural Capital and Vernacular Debt in Disney's Representation of New Orleans." *Journal of Popular Culture* 49.6 (Dec. 2016): 1224-40.

Manuscripts in Preparation

"Blues, Memory, and Loss in James Hannaham's *Delicious Foods* and Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones*."

"These folks need my music;" Blues and Multi-Ethnic Solidarity in Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues*."

PRESENTATIONS

Panels Organized or Chaired

2019 Organizer and Chair, "Sweet Home Chicago: Rethinking Blues Literature." Modern Language Association (MLA) 2019 Conference, "Textual Transactions," Chicago, January 2019.

2018 Chair, "Transcultural Blues." Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States (MELUS) 2018 Conference, "TransCulture," Las Vegas, May 2018.

Conference Papers

- 2019 “‘Old folk’s music . . . dead folk’s music’: Blues, Memory, and Precarity in James Hannaham’s *Delicious Foods* and Jesmyn Ward’s *Salvage the Bones*.” The Society for the Study of Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States (MELUS) Annual Conference (Cincinnati). March 2019.
“Reading the Blues Diaspora; Or, The Transnational turn in Multi-Ethnic Blues Literature.” Modern Language Association (MLA) National Conference (Chicago). 5 January 2019.
- 2018 “Transnational Blues: A Shift in Blues Literature.” The Society for the Study of Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States (MELUS) Annual Conference (Las Vegas). 3 May 2018.
“That Swampy Sound: The Politics of Identity in Swamp Music.” The Society for the Study of Southern Literature (SSSL) Conference (Austin, TX). 18 February 2018.
“The Black and Blues Atlantic: Mapping Contemporary Africadian Poetry in the Blues Diaspora.” Committee on the Literature of People of Color of the United States and Canada at the Modern Language Association (MLA) National Conference (New York). 4 January 2018.
- 2017 “Rambling Blues: Mapping the Contemporary Blues Tradition.” International Society for the Study of Narratives Conference (Lexington). 24 March 2017.
- 2016 “‘The Indian horses screamed’: Locating Identity through the Blues in Sherman Alexie’s *Reservation Blues*.” Association of Canadian College and University Teachers of English (ACCUTE) Conference (Calgary). 29 May 2016.
“I got them *Reservation Blues*: Transcultural exchange in Sherman Alexie’s American Indian Blues.” The Society for the Study of Southern Literature (SSSL) Conference (Boston). 11 March 2016.
- 2015 “Traded it off for that Voodoo thing:” Cultural Capital and Vernacular Debt in Filmic Representation of New Orleans.” Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association (PCA/ACA) National Conference (New Orleans). 1 April 2015.
- 2012 “Achieving Critical Balance in the Academic Career Internship.” (Talking Circle). Canadian Alliance for Community Service-Learning (CACSL) Conference (Saskatoon). 11 May 2012.

Invited Talks

- 2018 “Reading, Thinking, and Talking about the Blues: The Ethics of Consumption and the Nuances of Cultural Appropriation.” Guest Lecture for Eve Dunbar’s “Blues in/and African American Literature” seminar. Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, New York, 28 November 2018.
- 2017 “Race: Local, National, Global; A Conversation on Race in Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, and Zora Neale Hurston.” Podcast Lecture (Co-Host). University of Mississippi, Oxford, Mississippi, October 2017.

AWARDS & SCHOLARSHIPS

- 2018 University of Mississippi Graduate School Dissertation Fellowship for Fall 2018, \$6500.
- 2017 Nominated for the University of Mississippi’s Who’s Who Award.
Who’s Who Among Students in American Universities and Colleges honors university students who excel academically and demonstrate leadership.

- 2017 University of Mississippi English Department Summer Writing Fellowship, \$5000
- 2015 William E. Brigman Award for the Outstanding Graduate Student Paper delivered at the National Conference for the Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association (PCA/ACA). “‘Traded it off for that Voodoo thing:’ Cultural Capital and Vernacular Debt in Filmic Representation of New Orleans.” Honorable Mention.
- 2015 University of Mississippi Best Graduate Essay on Film.
“‘Traded it off for that Voodoo thing:’ Cultural Capital and Vernacular Debt in Disney’s Representation of New Orleans,” \$100.
- 2013-2018 Graduate Teaching Fellowship (University of Mississippi)
- 2011-2012 Graduate Teaching Fellowship (University of Saskatchewan)
- 2010-2011 Hannon Scholarship, University of Saskatchewan, \$3000

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Instructor

University of Mississippi

- ENGL 341 Studies in Cinema/Media Genres: How Blue Can You Get? Blues Fiction and Film (Proposed and Accepted)
- 2015 ENGL 224 American Literature after the Civil War (Summer)
WRIT 102: Business Themed Writing (Spring Two Sections)
- 2014 WRIT 101: Introduction to College Writing (Fall)

Teaching Assistant

University of Mississippi

- 2016 ENGL 353 Introduction to Film (Spring with Dr. Leigh Anne Duck and Fall with Chris Offutt)
- 2014 ENGL 223 American Literature Before the Civil War (Spring with Dr. Phillip Gordon)
- 2013 ENGL 224 American Literature after the Civil War (Fall with Dr. Annette Trefzer)

University of Saskatchewan

- 2011 English 110.6 Literature and Composition (Fall 2011-Spring 2012 with Dr. Lindsey Banco)
English 204.6 The History and Future of the Book (Fall 2011-Spring 2012 with Dr. Allison Muri)

RELEVANT EXPERIENCE

- 2019 Consultant for the University of Mississippi Graduate Student Writing Center
- 2016-2018 Editorial Assistant for *The Global South*
- 2015 Student Youth Mentor for the William Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation’s annual Summer Youth Institute
- 2014 Research Assistant for Adam Gussow and Jaime Harker for the books *Beyond the Crossroads: The Devil and the Blues Tradition* (2017) and *The Lesbian South: Southern Feminists, the Women in Print Movement, and the Queer Literary Canon* (2017)
- 2013 Accreditation Coordinator, University of Saskatchewan School of Public Health
- 2011 Editorial Assistant for *Essays on Canadian Literature*

PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITIES

Service to the Profession

Introduced Kiese Laymon for Ohio University's *Spring Literature Festival*, 4 April 2019.

Society for the Study of Southern Literature (SSSL) Website Update (2017-2018)

University Service

Student Recruitment, English Department, University of Mississippi, 2015-Present

Student Mentor, English Department, University of Mississippi, 2016-Present

RESEARCH INTERESTS

African American Literature

North American Multi-Ethnic Literature

US Southern Literature

American Literature (20th- and 21st-century)

Blues Literature and Culture

Transnational Studies

MEMBERSHIPS

Modern Language Association (MLA)

Association of Canadian College and University Teachers of English (ACCUTE)

The Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States (MELUS)

Canadian Association for American Studies (CAAS)

Society for the Study of Southern Literature (SSSL)

Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association (PCA/ACA)

Golden Key International Honors Society